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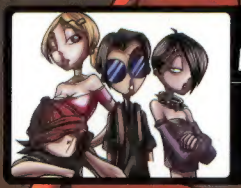

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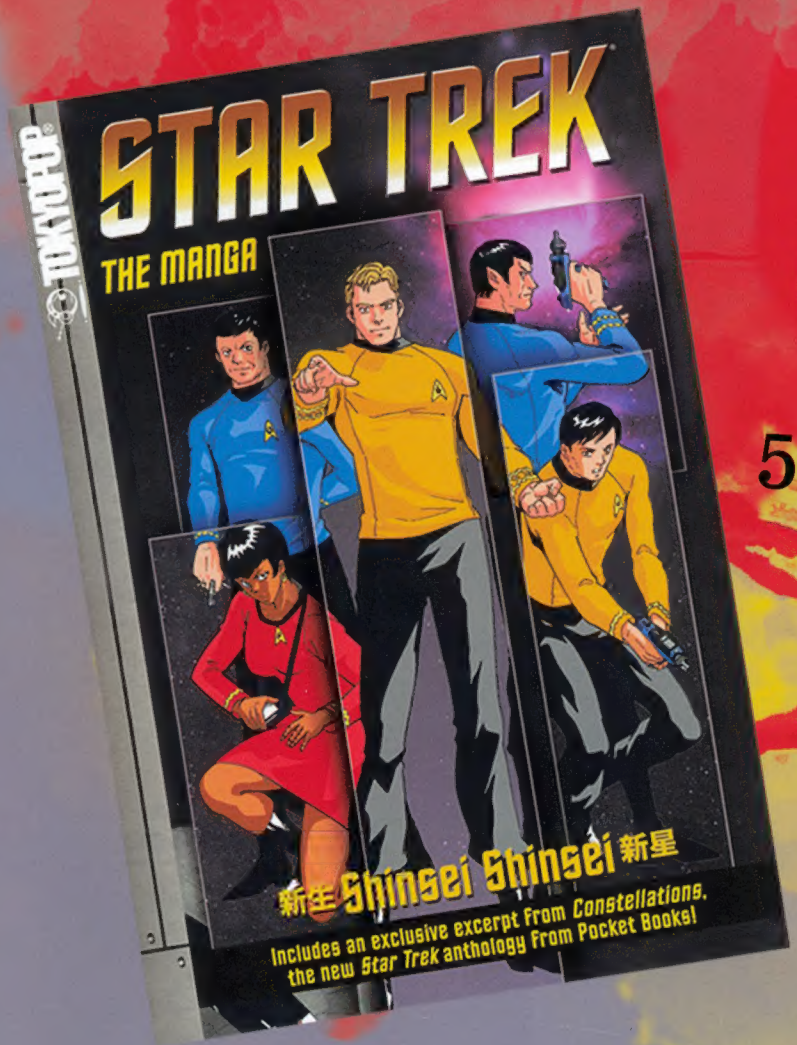
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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

Evolution

Since you are obviously a reader—hello reader—may I take a moment of your time? Still here? Good. As we forge ahead here at Fusion (we have three new projects in the works that you'll be seeing soon) we find ourselves intrigued with the functionality digital affords, while at the same time, love creating tangible media. And so my question to you is would you be more apt to scour Play (every stinking day!) or other magazines from Fusion if we offered digital versions, perhaps with added features like embedded movies, bonus content etc.? Your print edition would still come in the mail or be at newsstand; however, you'd have the digital too. Later this year with Girls of Gaming Volume 4 and our new magazine Rocket, we'll be partnering once again with Direct2Drive and bringing you some unique and intriguing digital content on the web. Should we do the same with Play, or keep making it exclusively out of logs? Do you prefer a new magazine launch to be print and digital or one or the other? I guess the real question is, do you get the same warm and fuzzy feeling sitting at your computer as you do holding a magazine?... And if not how can we help make that happen? What do you look for in digital media? Sorry for the impromptu survey but we're in R&D mode and who better to ask than the people who actually stop to read this page? Plus, if I ramble on about the impending next-gen wars or a handful of other subjects I've driven into the ground I may have my EiC license revoked.

And lastly, I was able to finally get around to bidding a fond farewell to the Xbox this issue, and each editor called out his or her top-two "Only on Xbox" all-time favorites. But we're curious. What are yours? Do let us know along with your overall opinion on Microsoft's first console. We need some fodder to keep Playback fresh and lively!

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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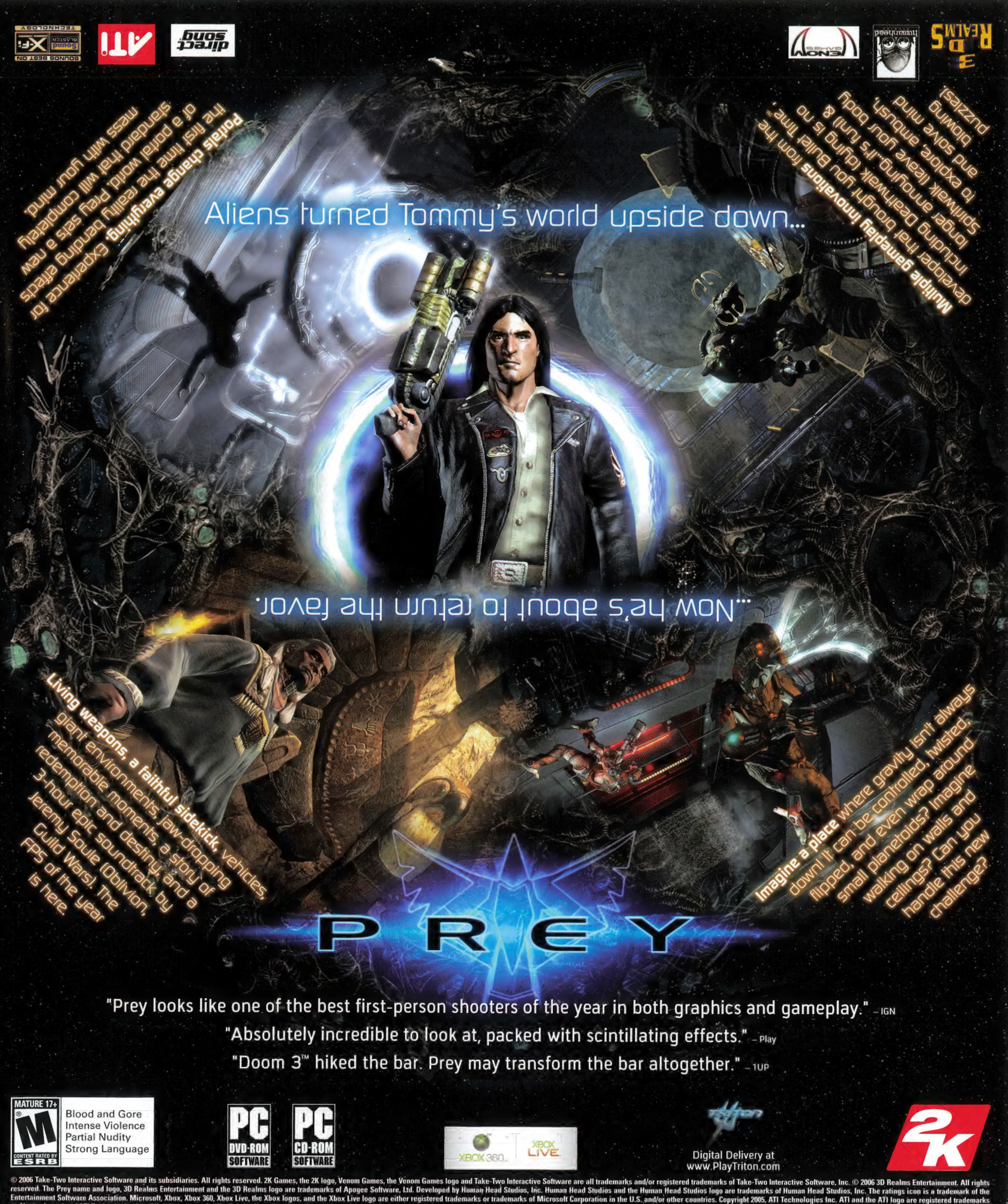
On the cover

Arthur vs. the serpent.
Art by Randy Green, Color by Dave McCaig.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playback

August 2006

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Pick Up The Soap, And Get a 360! Or 3.

There is a popular misconception among the members of our growing subculture that remain sans-three-sixty, especially those that still feel the sting of the holiday trickle.
As they sit with cumbersome controls in hand, racking their brains for as yet unattained goals in their games of old, cursing the archaic machinery that mocks them with its jealous cyclopean eye, their embitterment clings to the belief that a painfully short series of steps lies between them, and next-gen, high-def, gaming nirvana –
1) Buy Premium XBOX 360,
2) Hook "it must be better because it's Premium" 360 up to wealthier friend's HDTV,
3) Inhale,
4) Pass,
5) Exhale,
6) Groove…
My friends, if only it were that easy.
No, no, the actual list for what to expect when endeavoring to buy a 360, or bathe in prison, is as follows –
1) Pick up 360 at local store on Sunday just after opening hours,
2) Depart for home with erection,
3) Setup console to discover that it does everything but play and rip audio CDs successfully (thanks to an incessant "click, click" sound over the track.)
4) Call local store every day at 8 a.m. for 2 months with no result due to the Faberge-esque availability of the product,
5) Return 2 months later to a different store location and replace 360 number 1,
6) On drive home, try to decide which disc of the Led Zeppelin box set is fit to play first on this new, FULLY FUNCTIONING Xbox 360,
7) Setup to discover that number 2 flashes red lights while shutting itself, and all other electronics that are plugged into the same surge protector, down.
8) Try again with 360 running solo on two, separate, brand new surge protectors in two different rooms, with same result,
9) Immediately return to the store and request the power source from the old 360, which never shut down, even after being left on for hours,
10) Affix old power source to new 360 and pray,
11) Discover that, with the exception of a slightly longer startup, number 2 works… perfectly…
12) Replace "Hey Hey, What Can I Do" with Halo 2,
13) Initiate the required update only to discover that it kicks you out to an old-school green dashboard update, that informs you "Xbox Live is not responding," even though it must be to get you to that damn screen in the first place,
14) Get on with tech guy #1, who tells you "Bungie's server is down," and assures you it's, "not your 360," and not to worry,
15) Call two friends to discover they are both playing Halo 2 online at that very moment,
16) Wipe the bullshit from the receiver before conversing with tech girl #1 and her 3 supervisors, all of which ask for a phone number, "So we can contact you if we get disconnected."
17) Supervisor # 3 hangs up on you after an hour, but not until after assuring you it's a hardware problem. Not one of the five people with your number calls back.
18) Delete all saved Halo 2 information, including maps, from the hard drive in an attempt to successfully update number 2… no dice,
19) Pack up number 2 in the box, and head…back….to the store…..,
20) Call tech support from the car, and insist to the bubbly voiced tech girl #2, that the problem is too convoluted to run through with another person, and that this phone number must relate to one of the previous 5 agents,
21) Bubbles insists on the gist, and after recounting the tale again, she, with the sure and reliable cadence of the chihuahua, relays that the problem is related to, "microwaves and cell phones," and the fact that, "Some 360s require a hard line to update,"
22) Hang up on her in mid-sentence,
23) Return to the store on the same day, 30 minutes before closing, to exchange number 2 to the incredulous customer service girl,
24) Return home to try a tired hand at setting up number 3,
25) Decide number 3 works great and take 3 hours to re-download all of the Halo 2 maps,
26) Before bed, play a single game online, just to verify that it works,
27) Sleep knowing all is right in the universe,
28) Turn on your fully functioning machine 18 hours later,
29) All electronics shut off,
30) Begin writing this letter.

Yes folks, all of this really happened to me. This was the reward for offering up my $400+ dollars to the gaming gods, and now all I am left with is a single question for Mr. Gates.
I see the hard drive, but where's the lube?

Patrick Ryan a.k.a. Hanzo STE3L

"Wipe the bullshit from the receiver before conversing with tech girl #1 and her 3 supervisors..."

This one is just right

When I look at the three new systems I'm reminded of Goldilocks sitting down to try the bears' porridge. Sony's prices are scorching hot, especially when you consider the games don't look much different, if at all, from Microsoft's. Maybe I'll get it when the price goes down for the Blu-Ray DVD player, if that catches on.
I'm looking forward to playing with Nintendo's Wii. I can't wait to get that thing in my hands and play with it, especially the big franchises. But the graphics leave me a bit cold.
Which leaves Microsoft looking just right. They've got a good price point for games that look great, and they are getting the kinds of games that I want to play, which were absent from the old XBox.

Mmmmmm.... Porridge!

Erin Hoffman

Back to school

I don't have any system bias, I have the three current-gen consoles and am eagerly awaiting the next batch. I roll my eyes at fanboys and their "Console Y rules Console Z SUX" arguments. I felt great satisfaction in my smug, bias-less superiority.

So what happens? Dave only has to write "The SNES was more powerful (or so they tell me, funny how much better the Genesis games looked) but the Genesis won the race," and those old schoolyard arguments start welling up. How can he say that the SNES games looked much better! It sold more in the end blah blah blah... and I realize what I'm doing.

So thanks a lot Dave. Thanks for resurrecting the inner fanboy and showing up my arrogance for the hypocrisy it is. Yet again I see why this is my favorite gaming magazine; it's the only one that can provoke a strong reaction out of me.

Besides, you know Flashback looked better on the SNES than the Genesis...

"Man will not merely endure; he will prevail."
- William Faulkner

EA bought it

Love your mag. Rocks the house down.
Was hoping for some news about Visual Concepts and their Legends Football game. Did EA buy that too?
Can't EA just hire VC to make Madden 07? It would rock way harder. Madden hasn't changed since 2003. Where's the innovation? Why can't I play 2k5 on my Xbox 360? EA did that too didn't they? Bratty NFL hoarding bratty brats. I love Fight Night though.
Will Aki ever get to make a Wrestling game again? Still no game compares to N64's Aki games.
EA should get them out from the ghetto and make me a generic customizable wrestling/fighting game. It would sell a million, well, maybe one. To me.
Thanks again with the Sega coverage. Feels like you guys kind of go out of your way to let me know what they're up to.
Streets of Rage 4 better come soon or I will be sad.
Okay good night.

Daniel Landis

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ink

Sacred ground

Guess who's making the Castlevania movie?

Hollywood is awfully curious about video games. Video games are awfully curious about Hollywood. It was about time both sides got together to share their similar yet unique visions, gathering June 27 at the Beverly Hills Hotel for the inaugural Hollywood and Games Summit. Industry hot-shots from both sides discussed such topics as financing, creative control, distribution and better ways to make better entertainment while maintaining an increasingly robust business model.

While dollar signs are always a big driving force for any industry as mammoth as hollywood and games—business shop talk ruled the conference—there were more topics percolating than efficiency and cross-promotion. Keynote speaker Paul W.S. Anderson, director of *Mortal Kombat* and *Resident Evil*, spoke in length on what he believes a good video game movie needs to appease fans while soaring on its own as simply a great movie. Anderson said if you stay too close to the game, you're doomed. If you stray too far, you're doomed. No one can argue fans are demanding, but what about the problem of sticking so close you disarm the ability to surprise and build original character? Games inspired by movies make good movies, said Anderson. Some games just aren't right for movies.

But as a huge gamer himself, Anderson believes he's ready to take game adaptations to new levels. Following his speech, I had a chance to sit down with the expressive director, on break from his shoot in the desert on the next Resident Evil.

"The game industry is not a threat to the film industry."

~Paul W.S. Anderson

Interview

play: Worst video game movie ever?
Paul W.S. Anderson: In my opinion... I've learned [laughs]. In my experience in Hollywood, starting as a cynical young man, I've learned not to say bad things about other people. If you'd caught me ten years ago I'd talk for an hour about all the movies I hated and what was wrong with all of them and why it was all rubbish and shit and I'm just brilliant. But I've learned that comes around and bites you on the ass.

Of course, but I had to ask anyways. But what is the key to making a good video game movie?
In the first *Resident Evil* movie, we made a bold choice not to take the exact characters from the game, and I think it was the right choice because it paid off. But if you were a fan, the whole movie was just seeped in detail from the game. It was clear that people who made the movie were hardcore fans of the game. Even though you didn't get to see Jill Valentine and Berry Burton, it was clear you were in the world of Resident Evil. You'd have to be a pretty churlish, uber-fan to go, "Well, the people who made that film just didn't give a shit about *Resident Evil*." Even from the details like, we built the same train from *Resident Evil 2*, we put the same lettering on the side of it, crates in the background had the same numbers. The

He's been experienced...

A selection from PWSA's body of work, including many game-based movies. From left to right: Mortal Kombat (1995), Event Horizon (1997), Soldier (1998), Resident Evil 1 & 2 (producer) (2002, 2004) and Alien Vs. Predator (2004).

attention to detail was really vast.

And you really love games, huh? That helps.
Yes, I do. And something I learned from when we did *Mortal Kombat*, was we did test screenings. We created some of the sets from the game, and people were just so super excited to see the pit. I remember... [laughs] We were doing this test screening and this guy beside me, he just stood up and shouted, "Yeah, yeah, the pit!" He was just so happy to see it up onscreen. And I was like, wow, we could have built anything there, but we chose the pit. We could have spent 100 thousand dollars on anything, but we built the pit, and we got so much good-will and love from the audience for that that I thought, you know, really knowing the game, really playing them and being immersed in them pays off.

You're a filmmaker, you obviously love movies. But you did grow up with a love for games. What do you like that's different between the two?
It's just a different experience. A movie is a two-hour experience in the dark with several hundred people. A game, even if you're playing online with several hundred people, it still tends to be a solitary thing. It can go on for lot longer and your fingers don't work anymore. Movies are more immediately immersive, I think. So you have that group thing. I think horror works especially well when there's a whole room full of people. It amps up the scariness. So as scary as Resident Evil the game is, when you make it dark and the music's playing and the control buzzes, it's just not the same thing. It's not as scary as sitting in an audience watching a movie. They're just different experiences, and they give different feelings. That's why I feel the future is for the two to work hand-in-hand. The game industry is not a threat to the film industry. It's kind of like when TV first came along, and Hollywood wanted to crush television, because it saw it as a competitor. And now, Hollywood can't survive if it weren't for the revenue streams of television and video. I think Hollywood didn't quite know what to do with video games and saw them as a bit of a threat. People are gonna go out and spend their money on video games instead of going to see a movie. They'll do both. Now that Hollywood is seeing that, the door is open for projects that are more collaborative.

You've made a few video game movies, and you're ramping up to make a couple more. What draws you to these projects?
Just a love of the IP. I did *Mortal Kombat* because I actively pursued the movie. At a time when directors didn't want to do video game movies, because *Mario Bros.* had tanked, *Double Dragon* had tanked, and there was a bad buzz about *Street Fighter*. And my agent at the time said, "Why do you want to do a video game movie? They don't work." Video game movies just can't work. That's what people thought. I loved the game from playing it in the arcades in London, and I thought, no, it's not true. They've just made the wrong movies, or they've taken the right properties and made the wrong format. So I was always committed to Mortal Kombat because of the love of the game. The same for Resident Evil. I played all three games; at that time it was One, Two and Nemesis, and I played them all before I got involved in the movie. Making the movie just came out of the love for playing the games.

Do you see yourself forging the career path as the director who makes video game movies?
It's not something I'm specifically interested in doing, but it's not something I would mind if it ended up happening. I just think there are directors who do big literary adaptations, and there are directors who seem to like turning plays into movies. Fact is, I grew up in a generation when I don't go to the theater, I go home and play video games. So I'm more likely to find a really good video game that I like that I can turn into a movie then see a really good play on Broadway and go, "Ah, that's it, I must make *Closer*." I'm just from that different generation. And in the same way that there are other directors highly influenced by comic books. They make comic-book movies.

And there is some rich source material, as long as the material is understood.
And you can make completely different movies. *Mortal Kombat* is a martial arts movie with these mythic monsters in them. *Resident Evil*, the first movie, was like a chamber piece horror movie. *Castlevania* is a lush, romantic epic about dracula and his love through time. Yes, their source material is all video games, but so what? That would be like a director complaining, "Oh, I don't want to do too many book adaptations."

As more video game movies come to the table, I wonder if it'll be a problem when the director doesn't have that love and understanding of the material.
I think that's true, I really do. When Ron Howard makes *The Da Vinci Code*, you can bet he's read the book. You can bet he's read the book three or four times and read some books about the book. I don't know if a lot of filmmakers do the same justice to video games. They're probably more likely to have read the coverage and seen the game played by their assistant in the office. And it's just not the same thing. Because when you make an adaptation, as a director you're making hundreds of decisions a day and each one of those decisions will take those decisions closer or further away from the video game. And I think the only way you can be educated as to how far away you can go away from the video game and the way you can change it, or maybe you shouldn't change it, is by being immersed in the source material and knowing it as well as a hardcore fan does. And you can't do that by watching 10 minutes of the game and pulling stuff off the internet.

Well, you just feel it onscreen.
I don't have to name the movies, but you can see when the filmmakers had no idea really what the video game was about and what the joys of playing the video game are. **play**

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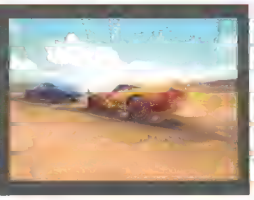

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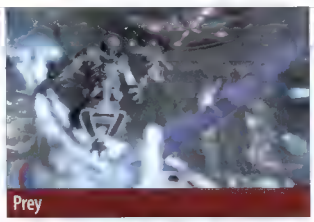
01	**Prey** 2K Games / Xbox 360
02	**NCAA Football 07** EA Sports / PS2
03	**Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Curse** Eidos / PS2
04	**Super Monkey Ball** Nintendo / NDS
05	**GTA: Liberty City Stories** Rockstar Games / PS2
06	**NFL Head Coach** EA Sports / Xbox
07	**Gradius Collection** Konami / PSP
08	**Cars** THQ / PS2
09	**Hitman: Bloodmoney** Eidos / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360
10	**Tomb Raider: Legend** Eidos/ Xbox 360



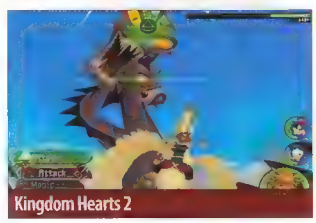
Prey

Gradius Collection

NPD Group Top Ten April Game Sales

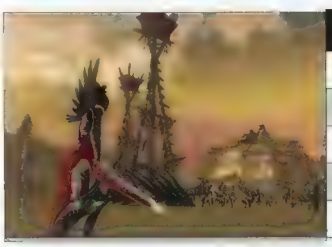
01	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS
02	**Kingdom Hearts II** Square Enix / PS2
03	**Brain Age: Train Your Brain In Minutes** Nintendo / NDS
04	**God of War** SCEA/ PS2
05	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** 2K Games/ Xbox 360
06	**TC's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter** Ubisoft/ 360
07	**MLB '06: The Show** SCEA/ PS2
08	**Guitar Hero Bundle** RedOctane/ PS2
09	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** Rockstar Games / PS2
10	**Kingdom Hearts** Square Enix / PS2

New Super Mario Bros.



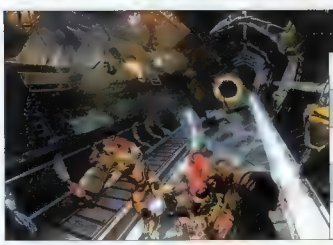
Kingdom Hearts 2

Play Editor and Reader Picks



Dave Halverson

01	**Ninety Nine Nights** Microsoft Game Studios / Xbox 360
02	**Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins** Capcom / PSP
03	**Monster Madness** Xbox 360 / Southpeak
04	**Enchanted Arms** Xbox 360 / Ubisoft
05	**Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer** Southpeak / PS2



Brady Fiechter

01	**Prey** 2K Games / Xbox 360
02	**Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins** Capcom / PSP
03	**Tomb Raider: Legend** Eidos / Xbox 360
04	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** 2K Games / Xbox 360
05	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS

Greg Orlando

01	**LOTR Battle for Middle Earth II** EA / Xbox 360
02	**TC's Splinter Cell Dbl. Agent** Ubisoft / Xbox 360
03	**Rockstar Games Table Tennis** Rockstar/ Xbox 360
04	**Jade Empire** Microsoft Game Studios/ Xbox
05	**Chromehounds** Sega / Xbox 360

Casey Loe

01	**Okami** Capcom / PS2
02	**Yakuza** Sega / PS2
03	**Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan!** Nintendo / NDS
04	**Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins** Capcom / PSP
05	**Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth** Square Enix / PSP

Mike Griffin

01	**Half Life 2: Episode One** Valve / PC
02	**Guild War Faction** NC Soft / PC
03	**Titan Quest** THQ / PC
04	**Prey** 2K Games / PC
05	**Outrun 2006: c2c** Sega / PC

Nick DesBarres

01	**Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth** Square Enix / PSP
02	**Mother 3** Nintendo / GBA
03	**DQ & FF in Itadaki Street...** Square Enix / PSP
04	**FF XI: Treasure of Aht...** Square Enix/ Xbox360
05	**Astal** Sega / Sega Saturn

Eric Patterson

01	**Disgaea 2** NIS America / PS2
02	**Tetris DS** Nintendo / NDS
03	**KOF 2006** SNK Playmore /PS2
04	**Big Brain Academy** Nintendo / NDS
05	**Summon Night: SS** Atlus/GBA

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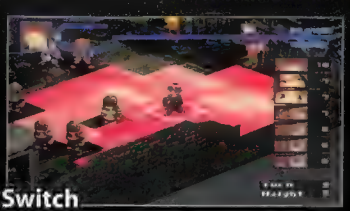

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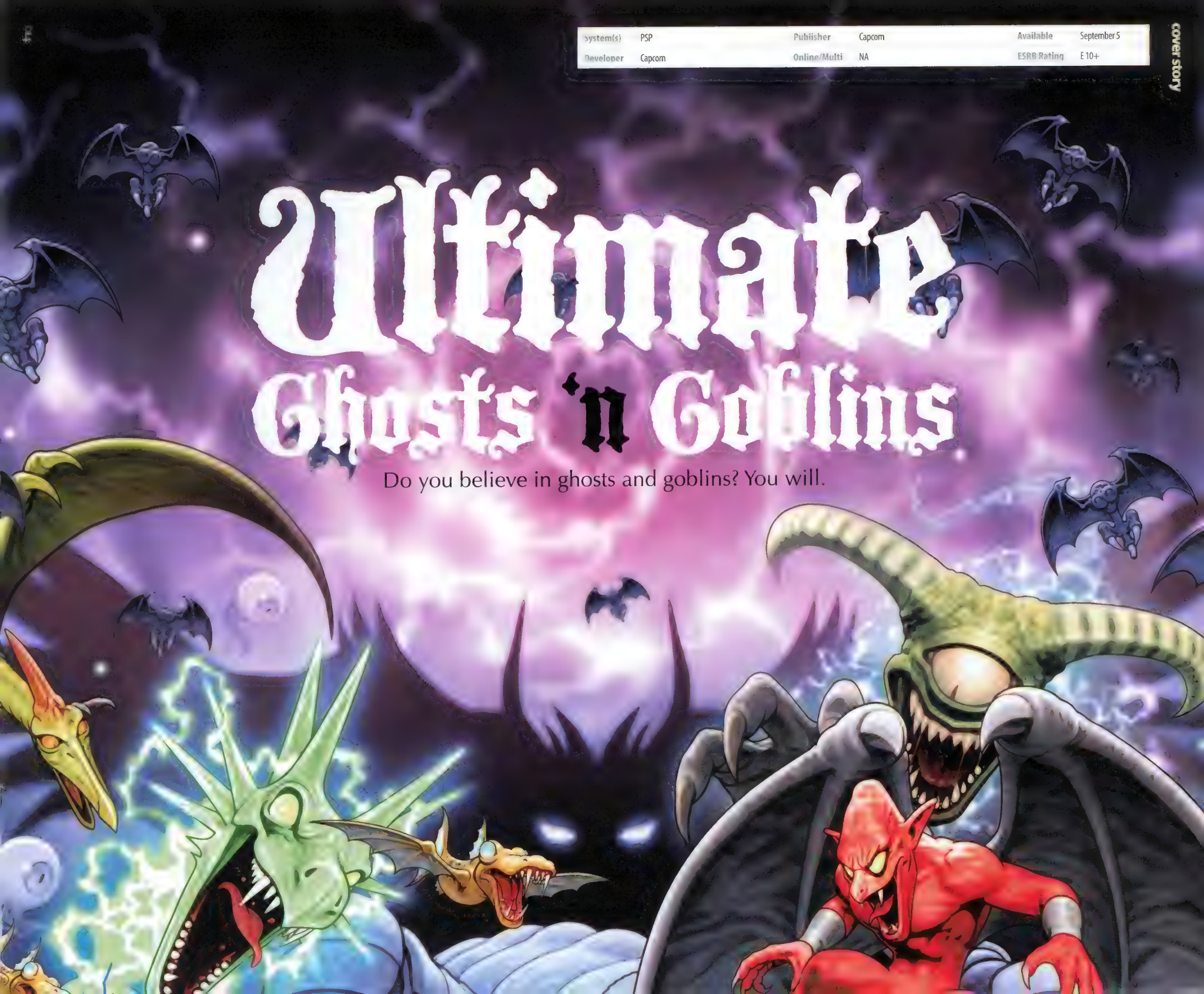
System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Capcom	Available	September 5
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins

Do you believe in ghosts and goblins? You will.



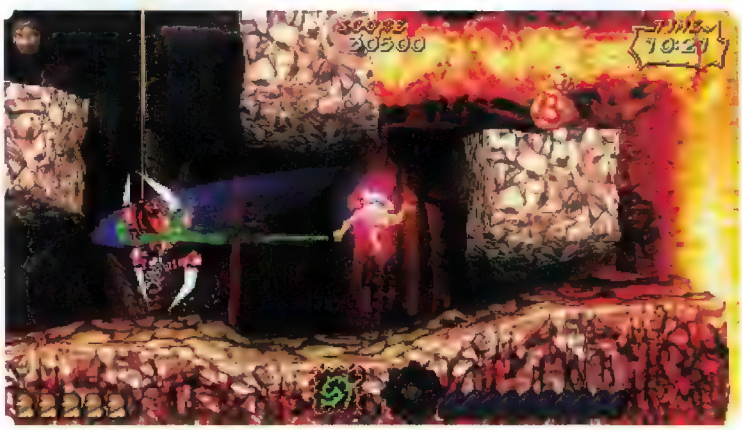
Japanese-developed 8- and 16-bit games were paramount to the advancement of gaming. Without them there's almost no chance we'd be where we are today. Among the scores of franchises born of that golden era, only a handful have been able to stand the test of time and mass consumerism, and of those, only a chosen few still strike a chord with fans so deep that each new game is a veritable event. Mario, Castlevania, Ninja Gaiden, Metal Gear, Final Fantasy, and yes, Ghosts 'n Goblins are among them. For some, sequels placed in the hands of alternate developers—take Shinobi, Contra, and Blaster Master for instance—have proven a curse, while some have yet to make their way back, such as Kid Icarus, Magician Lord, and Streets of Rage. The mark of this particular beast is so patented that there's only one man at Capcom capable of furthering the bloodline, Tokurou Fujiwara, and he took his sweet time. Sure, those 8-bit memories also include heaving your NES controller at the wall like a human catapult, but that's all changed…well, sort of.

It all began back in 1986 when Capcom ported Ghosts 'n Goblins from the arcade to our beloved NES (to which we owe all), dropping players eager to save a fair princess from the clutches of Loki (a.k.a. the Devil, Satan, Beelzebub) into a veritable meat grinder. Games were hard back then, and frequently offered limited continues, but G 'n G—even with its unlimited continues—was, for lack of a better word, sadistic. In the instance you did reach the end with your backup controller and sanity intact…so close that you could smell the princess's blue hair…it sent you back to the beginning. That's right puny gamer: Do it again!! Muahahaha! I think I left my NES running for about a week before I finally beat the game and got around to fixing the ding in my wall and signing up for therapy to suppress my fear of red devils. Strange that as soon as Ghouls 'n Ghosts was announced for Genesis it was all I could think about. Foolish mortal that I am, I figured that the time spent honing my skills between 1986 and 1989 would make my next jaunt through the underworld a walk in the graveyard. I was wrong of course, but at least it was a one-way ticket, with graphics so exalted I built an altar for my Genesis. Our story ends in 1991 with the SNES Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts, which introduced a LONG overdue reversible double-jump (thus replacing the suckiest non-correctable jump ever), turbulent oceans, rushing waves, the soundtrack finally put to a worthy sound chip, and rotation, which at the time pretty much just made you wet yourself at the sight of it. It was also, of course, insanely difficult, but so overcome with joy was I that a fist could have burst out of the screen and socked me in the head that I would have shaken its cold, dead hand. And then, as it did with our beloved Strider and Bionic Commando, a silence fell over the land…

Since, there have been the spin-offs: Gargoyle's Quest I & II, Demon's Crest, and Nazomakaimura: Incredible Toons (a strange Japanese puzzle game that thankfully stayed in Japan) but Arthur, it seemed, had thrown his last dagger, until the announcement at last year's Tokyo Game Show that Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins was headed for PSP. So it is with great honor and a smidgeon of trepidation, that I (we) bring you this first review of creator Fujiwara's latest attempt to dislodge us from our mundane gaming lives.

> "'Ultimate' doesn't begin to describe its vividly color-drenched, painstakingly detailed piousness..."

Will Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins' level of difficulty give you night sweats? Wait for it…yes…and no. Forget almost everything you know about Ghosts 'n Goblins. Yes, Loki has once again snatched our fair, blue-haired royal in an effort to mix the bloodlines and rule the world, and yes, Arthur still prefers boxers over briefs, but this is an entirely re-imagined adaptation of the classic formula; ten kinds of beautiful, with a full-blown intro, and stickier than any previous games in the series. Forget that it's 2D and therefore prone to superior graphics, "Ultimate" doesn't begin to describe its vividly color-drenched, painstakingly detailed effects-laden piousness. Married with the kind of soundtrack that resonates with old-school gamers like dog hearing, this game is get-down-on-your-knees-and-thank-the-deity-of-your-choice



"Arthur still prefers boxers over briefs, but this is an entirely re-imagined adaptation of the classic formula..."

Dress For Success

With each suit of armor comes it's inherent benefits. Use them while you can and/or protect them diligently. A bare naked Knight has one foot in the grave.

glorious. Capcom's burgeoning Demon World Village is teeming with new monstrosities of all shapes and sizes so exquisitely fashioned in 3D that they resonate with all of the grace of hand-drawn, only with the kind of wispy effects and animated textures 3D affords. Their hunger to dislodge Arthur's armor has not waned, only this time Arthur has packed much better for the hellish road ahead. Items, shields, magic, and more (and better) weapons lend a much needed hand to the proceedings but none so much as the re-spawning points that reanimate Arthur's lifeless heap of bones where they lie, at least until you extinguish all of your lives. Although difficult, Ultimate is far more user-friendly and forgiving than any other game in the series. Playing on Novice is just difficult enough to where skilled gamers whose senses have dulled over the (3D) years will have a fairly easy time of it, while casual gamers will find it at times maddening but altogether doable. Standard mode is next, followed by Ultimate mode, which is reserved for the unemployed or imprisoned.

Lance, dagger, axe, and that cursed torch are joined by crossbow, vine whip, bomb, and most notably the homing Swallow Blade. When you get this, take extra care in holding onto it. Beware of minions with clay pots overhead that may drop an alternate weapon when exploded and the odd, cleverly-placed torch. This is a boss annihilator and can clear the air of those pesky G'nG flying pests, such as the universally-loathed red devils. Various shields (search high and low for these or get them from stronger enemies) also prove useful, especially the Dragon Shield which possesses the spirit of a flying dragon. It's a limited use hovering item but the best way across the game's brutal platforming bits, of which there are many, including Death Castle, an inner sanctum where Arthur rides a cloud of souls into an area of dense flora that you'll think is the coolest thing you've ever seen, until you get to the Rotten Swamp where you are required by law to gawk at the screen like you've never seen a video game before. There are some staggeringly beautiful areas in this game. Next we have magic (which burn various sums of magic points) such as flare, inferno, invincibility, the ability to slow time etc., and Warp Staffs that allow Arthur to return to previous areas at any time—especially useful when you need an item from a previously-visited level to access unreachable treasure. Add a myriad of armor types that provide varying degrees of magic power, vitality, durability, boost, and even flight (visions of Act Raiser 2), a ledge grab if you can believe it, and mid-level and pre-boss save points and you've got nothing less than a modern 2D masterpiece.

Don't get me wrong; Ultimate doesn't suffer from Strider 2 syndrome. All of this padding comes at a price. You will run out of lives and need to begin levels anew—it's a brutally hard game. Arthur is simply better suited for the onslaught and this new invention, the memory stick, is one dandy device. And if you're worried about length (spoiler alert!) remember back in 1986 when you had to do it twice? Well, that was nothing. I won't say what the item is, but, I had 3 when I hit Loki's front porch (and what a grand porch it is) and I needed 20! The difference here is that once dropped back in from the top with your earned items, Warp Staffs, and armor, there's more to love (branching and secrets galore) and you'll find yourself happy to gawk in awe once again at the splendid scenery. Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins is "2D" but it's also a highly-produced, meticulously planned, big-budget release. This is no throwback to side-scrollers gone by, this is 2D handheld gaming evolved.

Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins score 9.5

play: Even though the Ghosts 'n Goblins franchise has spanned generations, the basic formula remains compelling, even (or especially) in the wake of 3D gaming. How does it feel for you personally as the series creator for it to still be so beloved after all these years?
Fujiwara: It's great to know that players still love the franchise. I think its success is a testament to our hard work in making it the best game it could be and the fans have recognized that. I would like to keep creating games that have a strong impact and that gamers can enjoy playing.

How much thought went into the additions you have made to Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins? Did you have any reservations about adding so much to the core system?
It has been a while since the last title came out and so the technology and marketability has changed significantly. Also, the gaming audience has become more diversified. Therefore, we devised the game and added things so that people can enjoy it in their own way, and I think it has turned out extremely well. However, one thing I struggled with was getting the difficulty level just right. The difficulty level of this game is supposed to provide just enough challenge to keep the player on his or her toes, while offering a sense of accomplishment to keep the player going stage after stage. But on the other hand, the challenging gameplay can be a major barrier for casual gamers. After I struggled with configuring the best difficulty level, I decided to have three game modes in order to satisfy fans of the previous installments as well as be accessible enough to newcomers to the series. Particularly with the Novice Mode, it's not simply easier than the other difficulty settings, but I tweaked it so you can play more dynamically while feeling the same level of excitement as the harder difficulty levels. Rather than just being easy, it has its own balance and feel, so I encourage even more experienced players to give it a try.

What do you feel is the most important building block to expanding the franchise?
I think it is having simplicity of design/gameplay, while being diverse at the same time. Also important is creating the game world and designing the gameplay to be stimulating enough to challenge the player to strive to go further and unlock more.

How's the PSP overall to develop on? Are you happy with its capabilities? What are its strongest and weakest points?
It's always a challenge the first time we make a game for a new platform, and the PSP was no different. It was a continual process of trial and error. For the performance of the hardware, it would have been nice if there was a little more memory or the CPU was a little more powerful. There is no doubt the PSP is a great machine if you simply look at it as a handheld, but its design is such that you expect more performance out of it. The large screen is its greatest strength as a handheld device. When subsequent versions of the PSP are released, I am sure they will rival home console machines in power and sleek design.

The closest (and only) thing gamers have to a Ghosts 'n Goblins is Castlevania which we've been lucky enough to see now with each passing year. Why hasn't Capcom adopted a similar strategy with Ghosts 'n Goblins?
At Capcom, we strive to let the game creators do what they want, to try new and different things. This is why Capcom has seen so many successful new franchises over the years. For gamers who want to play new and unique gaming experiences, I think they know that is what Capcom is all about.

"My passion is creating games that are attractive to gamers, and to myself, all the while getting them excited as they play..."
–Tokurou Fujiwara

If the quaking volcanoes don't get you the local fowl will.

"At Capcom we [illegible] to let the game developers do what they want, to try new and different things..."

~Tokurou Fujiwara

Let's talk Maximo. Was he the spiritual successor to Ghosts 'n Goblins, even though he was born in the US and designed by Matsushita-san?
Even though I was not involved with this game, Maximo did have a lot in common with the design concepts discussed earlier. I see Maximo as a sort of experiment in mixing the creation of a new franchise with the essence of the Ghosts 'n Goblins series. It wasn't simply a 3D Ghosts 'n Goblins, nor was it a brand-new original series. So I guess it's safe to say it was more of a trailblazer rather than a successor.

2D gaming of this magnitude is rarely seen these days, and so for any gamer who started playing post 32-bit, a 2D next-gen console game would seem like a fresh new genre. Do you see yourself designing a next-gen 2D game or do you feel the market for 2D has now shifted onto handheld?
I think 2D gaming is still evolving, so I would like to design a game on a next-gen console if I had the chance. If users recognize the excitement of playing 2D games on handhelds again and ask for a 2D game on the next-generation consoles, then there is a good possibility it could happen.

Do you feel that the Nintendo Wii may offer that opportunity—perhaps spark developers to create less complex games based on fun and replayability over big budgets? There's so much to be said for the truly great character design and fun a game like Ghosts 'n Goblins offers.
I expect Nintendo Wii will offer 2D and original games a new lease on life. Additionally, I would be happy if more games that bring out creativity or personality are released and give way to new possibilities in the future market.

Do you feel that the price point and innovative control will make Wii the number one console in Japan? They certainly had a great E3...
I think Wii could become the number one console in Japan. But I wonder how it will go over with older gamers. Essentially, the market has been driven by the relatively older-age gamers. I think the existence of software that is aimed at this segment of gamers holds the key to its success, partly because younger gamers are pretty satisfied with the DS already.

Where does your passion lie as a game creator? What do you believe are the most fundamental elements a game must have in this day and age?
My passion is creating games that are attractive to gamers, and to myself, all the while getting them excited as they play. I always convey to people that games are a more appealing form of entertainment than other media. Therefore the most basic element which is necessary for a game is of course being attractive or appealing, but at the same time simple and accessible, easy to pick up and play.

What message do you have for all of the Ghosts 'n Goblins fans in the US?
People who played the previous installments will discover many things, and come up with many strategies to beat the game. They'll find some places to laugh, too. This Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins is one of the best PSP games out now. Please enjoy it, wherever you go.

G&G

RETRO

Art Gallery

Allow us to jar your memory and summon back all of those 8 and 16-bit inner demons. Did you kill 'em all?

Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts (1991)

Ghouls 'n Ghosts (1989)

Daimakaimura (Ghouls 'n Ghosts) (1994)

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System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Capcom	Available	September
Developer	Clover Studio	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NR

Okami

Clover Studios Interview

words **Brady Fiechter**

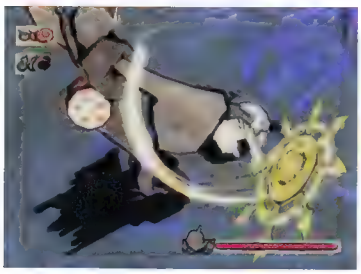
play: How important is the artistry and visual presentation to your gamemaking? Even your business cards are oddly expressive.
Atsushi Inaba: Even with the business card being so different, if we're gonna be a company who talks about making new, truly different games, we should extend that idea all the way through to how we present ourselves as people, as creators.

And what to you is that new game?
Original games aren't just something to me where I say, "Oh, this is a new title, this is an original title." A truly original game is something that myself as a developer and the people playing my game can say that they've never experienced anything like it before.

A colleague of yours once told me you're one of the few people who seems to obsessively want to push the art of gamemaking forward.
All I want to do is make games. I love to make games. It makes me feel really good to hear that. I do want to make an industry that supports games like I described. But it's not something I can do by myself. I

"I want to make people feel joy and happiness deep down inside."

~Atsushi Inaba



want to be part of the puzzle that makes the games industry more interesting.

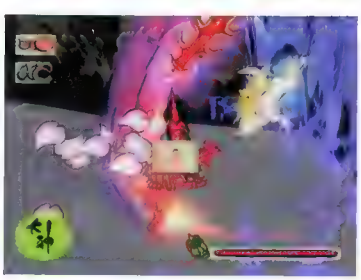
What drives your passion?
Games are a beautiful thing. Playing games is fun. Watching games is fun. Listening to games is fun. Games are something you can play over and over again and experience in different ways each time. That makes them a very unique form of entertainment. I want to continue to express this form of entertainment as best I can, and in the future, something that drives me is finding a way to complete the vision of that total package of entertainment that games can be.

How important is technology to reaching that goal? It's interesting to see Sony and Nintendo going down different paths.
I don't necessarily think that technology is the most important thing to achieve that vision. You make the distinction between Nintendo and Sony, I don't think either one is right or wrong. And even including Microsoft in this, each one of them has a different style. Our jobs as creators is to make something on top of that hardware and look at the best way we can go with it. I don't look at technology and think of how it limits me. I look at what is interesting for a certain style of game and then move with that.

How does Okami fit in this expression?
I want to make people feel joy and happiness deep down inside. As I was talking about what you can do with games, and how they can be so much, I wanted to take that idea and express it through a game in a way that makes you feel a wonder and happiness inside of you. And with Okami, I wanted to express this through the beauty of nature.

What about nature fascinates you?
One thing that fascinates me about nature is that it's become less and less able to be experienced. As people living in modern times, we live in these concrete areas and the only times we get to experience nature is when we go off to the mountains, which is something special. With Okami, I wanted that sense, but I also wanted players to be able to go through and create nature and get back to nature by reviving it. When you defeat an enemy, you are reviving nature in that area and bringing it back to that world. I really am interested in how we experience nature as people.

Just how much has the idea of nature inspired Okami?
It did inspire it, but it's kind of a different type of inspiration of what I talked about, going into the mountains. If you listen to new age music, it's something that you sit back and experience passively. Experiencing the nature in Okami is quite



The art style was chosen for a reason

active, holding the controller and creating a sense of nature in a different way for yourself.

Can you talk about the localization process? There's a lot of alcohol references in the game, has that proved to be a problem?
There's a lot of kanji in the game. The main point we're doing is making the game world understandable for an American player, but as far as the alcohol goes; that's a very important part of the game, so we're not going to be changing it.

Do you look at Okami as a risk at all? An aggressively different game isn't much accepted right now.
I would completely agree with you that it is high risk. Especially in the United States, where I think users will look at it and since it's not just a radically different game in play, but visually. I hope players will get past whatever stumbling blocks are there and really dig inside and experience everything that is there. Whether they'll actually stop and give it a chance is where the risk lies. But we didn't make this game because we wanted to take a risk, we made Okami because we wanted to make a great, interesting game.

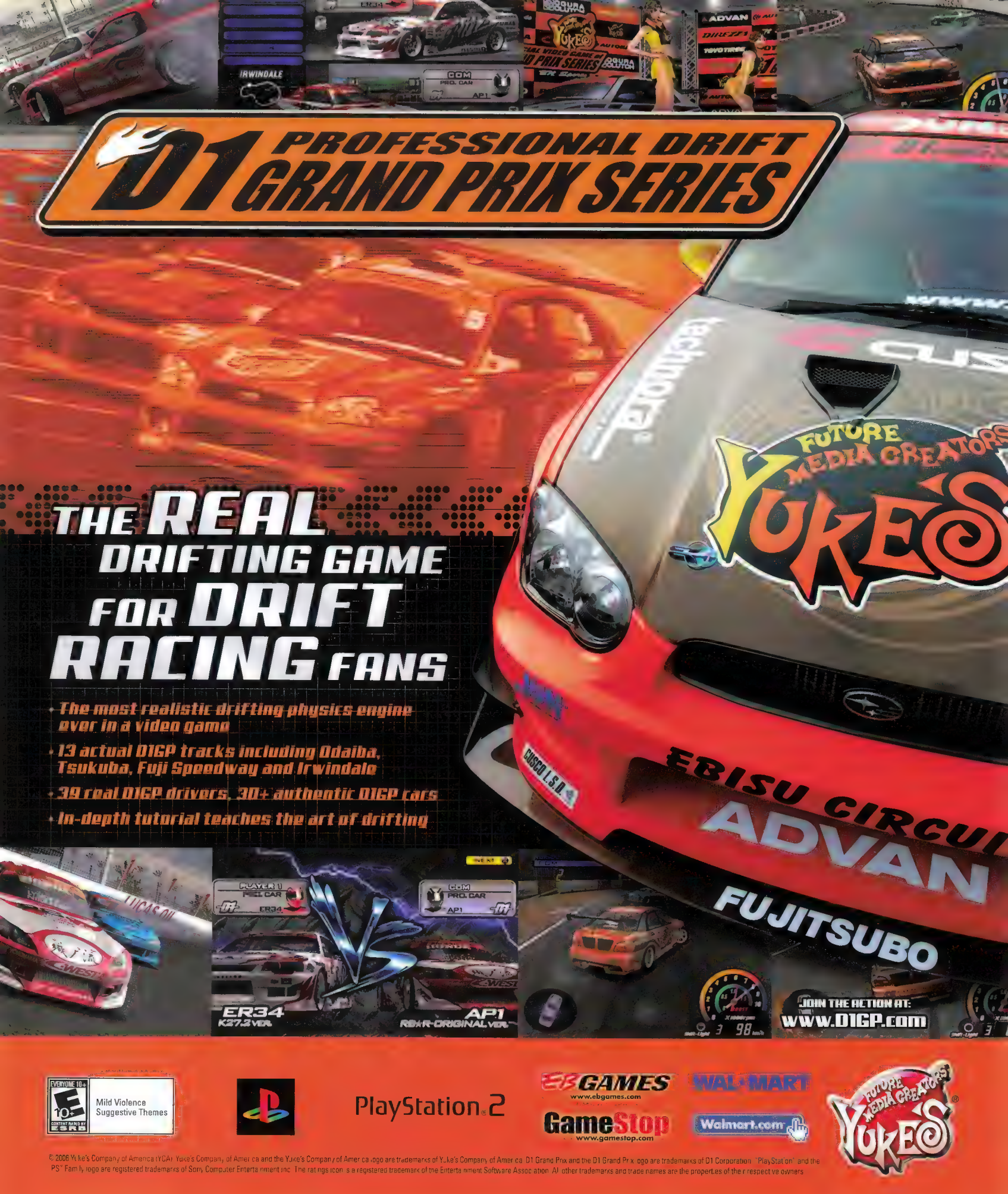
If you take a game like, say, ICO or Shadow of the Colossus, which is often regarded, even within the industry, as superior experiences... Do you think about making a game that matters?
Those are good examples, and I love those games a lot, but ICO and Shadow of the Colossus are two games that as a user, you either really get it or you don't get at all. Okami isn't a type of game where were trying to achieve something like that. We tried to make a game that someone like you will respect but will also sell if people embraced it.

I think one of the more revolutionary aspects of the game that I didn't appreciate till I played was the feeling of playing a wolf. This is probably the first time a non-human character has really been mastered.
First of all, thank you for the comment. When you pick up the game, you know it's an animal you are playing, but you don't necessarily feel like an animal as the main character. I think that comes from the fact that much of the staff has experienced making action games with humans as the lead. Transferring that ability and experience from a human main character to a wolf was something we worked so hard on, by looking at movement in videos.

There are a some many unique elements to the game. It's pretty rare that a game has even one important hook. Was there ever any pressure to simplify or make it more approachable?
All the innovations were necessary for the game to be what it is. So I did feel that pressure, but kind of in a different way. For instance, once we made the sumai art style, if you just have an action game that looks like sumai, it's just different, because it looks like sumai. There's nothing different about the actual action. So you get used to it right away, it's nothing out of the ordinary. But once we added in the brush, then you're interacting with the sumai. It begins to justify why the game is that visual style. **play**

"A truly original game is something that myself as a developer and the people playing my game can say that they've never experienced anything like it before."

-Atsushi Inaba



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System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	September
Developer	From Software	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	RP

ENCHANTED ARMS

Not quite enchanting, but oddly appealing

Brady Fiechter

Games have become such assembly-line productions, it's no wonder you don't often have reviews split down the middle. It's almost unheard of to see intelligent, informed debate from critics who both love and hate the same game and everywhere in between. Most of what we play just don't require much of a look beyond the surface.

Playing Enchanted Arms—renamed from [eM]-eNCHANT arM for easier US digestion—got me thinking of just how much could be said for a game that seems so obvious at first. It's a game that flirts with unique personal expression while sticking to some dull

conventions. You could point to a number of flaws, rip it apart for dumb stretches of dialogue and sloppy design. If you look deeper, you might even be offended by the strained attempts at social commentary and daring characterization. But the moments of absurdity are actually lively and fun; the game is as different as it is recognizable, and that especially works given the components that are actually handled quite well.

I like Enchanted Arms. I like that it held my interest more than more polished, technically sound games. It's an RPG that has abstract personality and distinct Japanese flavorings that slowly build a rather intriguing experience. I like that some could hate it, and some could love it. We need more of this.

We reviewed Enchanted Arms in Play Japan a few months back, rewarding it with an 8. I haven't completed this American preview version and can't provide the finer details of the experience, so look at this as a general second

" I like that some could hate it, and some could love it... We need more of this..."

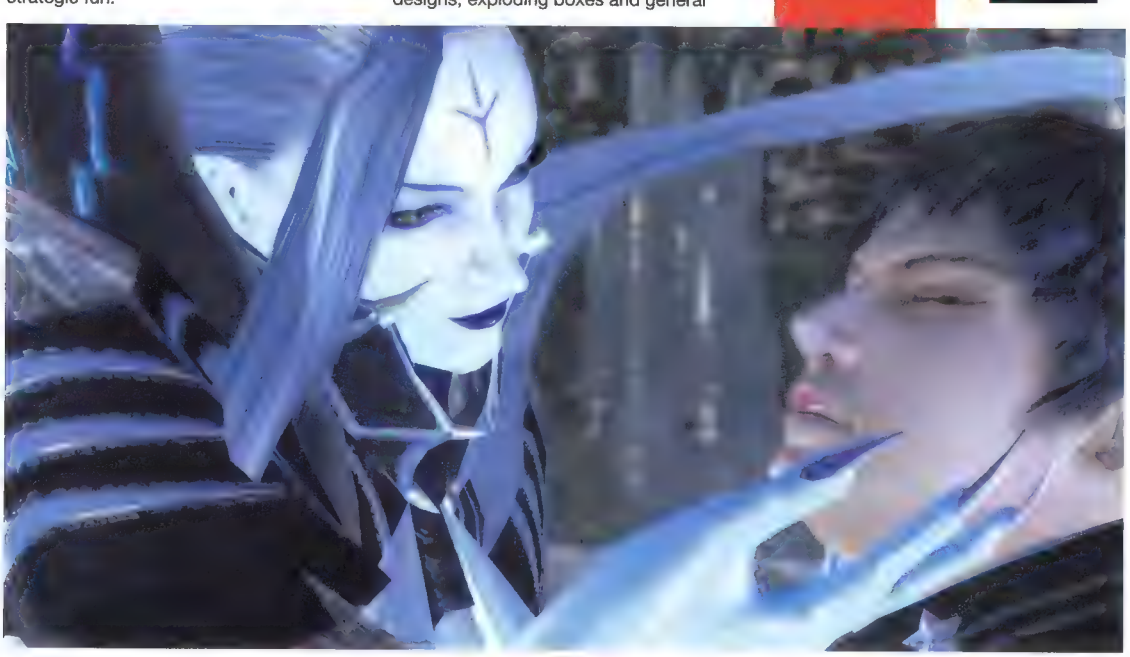
opinion on a game that is obviously ripe for attention—the first traditional next-generation role-playing experience from overseas.

I come to the game as a fan of RPGs and a distant observer of anime. There's an esoteric tone going on that anime fans will latch onto more than most. The snappy figures survive a pretty mundane story: "The golem war was the name given by future generations to a conflict that took place a thousand years ago. After the war, humankind quickly rebuilt the world, using a combination of technology and enchanting, the only form of magic not lost to them."

Forget the story, enjoy the nicely-staged battle system. Played out over a grid, the randomly generated action contains all the usual suspects: experience, sub systems, money, attributes, super attacks. The golems of the story become your allies, as you structure them to your liking and bring them into the battles. The system may appear quite basic at first, but embellishments like the vitality system—you have to pay attention to the time and frequency certain characters cycle in to the front line—ramp up the strategic fun.

From Software seems to have rubbed up against a few overt restrictions in the development process; the game can feel incomplete and compromised. But you can't fault it for not carrying a pleasing mood and universe. There's nothing here that excites or is overly inspired, but the world is complete and immersive. For a game where bad voice acting, pedestrian designs, exploding boxes and general

simplicity rule the day, Enchanted Arms has enough layered expression to balance it into a pleasant role-playing experience.
play



Xenosaga Episode III
Also Sprach Zarathustra

Ich vermisse nicht die [illegible]

words **Casey Loe**

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Bandai Namco
Developer	Monolith	Available	September

"Monolith has promised to confront the challenge in a longer and more satisfying quest..."

Fans of the series will be right at home with the rich presentation.

The once-promising Xenosaga series has been losing momentum rapidly, having parted with most of its original staff and many of its fans after the release of the sloppy Episode II. Now the series is coming to an early finish—the original plan to release six installments has been abandoned, and Episode III will now be the finale. Xenosaga. As one the most story-intense series in RPG history, the premature end has many concerned; can Monolith wrap things up in a way that will satisfy Xenosaga's dedicated fans?

So far, the prognosis looks good. Monolith has promised to confront the challenge in a longer and more satisfying quest, and while we can't speak to the results of that, we can report that the game is far more attractive and polished than the first two installments. The tedious battles of Episode II have been scrapped, the characters have been redesigned for the better, and the environments are finally at the level of quality you would expect from a late-generation PS2 game.

The most significant change is in the battle system, which is far more conventional than Episode II's. The Boost system has returned, but the Zone system is long gone. The strategy now comes in the form of status conditions that you can inflict on foes in lieu of damage. For example, every foe has a "Break" gauge that you can strike it instead of their health bar. A successful Break will leave them unable to attack for two turns and vulnerable to critical hits from the rest of the party. While boss battles involve plenty of strategy, standard encounters can be zipped through quickly and are free of the long loading times that have marred past titles in the series.

Of course, the story is the thing, and while the original writers have moved on, the new staff is sticking to the detailed game plan that was set out at the beginning of the series. A helpful database option summarizes every character, location, and plot point that has occurred thus far, and provides reassurance that Monolith knows exactly how many loose ends they have to contend with. We'll see how they do when the game hits U.S. shores in late August. **play**

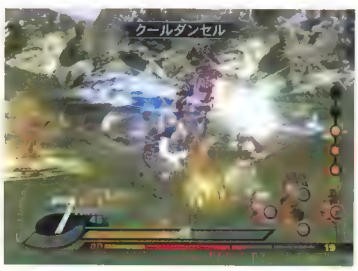
System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Tri-Ace	Available	September

Valkyrie Profile 2 SILMERIA

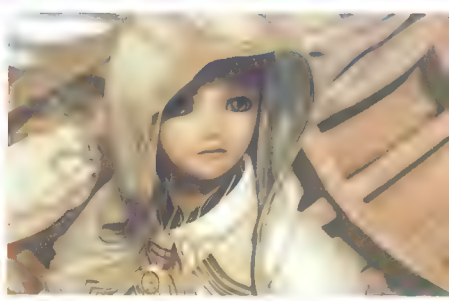
words **Brady Fiechter**

Dare I say Valkyrie Profile 2 Silmeria is in some ways more visually striking than the almighty Final Fantasy XII? Ok, so that's a fairly broad and arguable statement to make, but a grand appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of this prequel to the PlayStation original can't be denied. The art style plays to more classic sensibilities, using the Norse mythologies for inspiration. The choice to maintain strict 2D movement through the world has afforded an immense detail and richness in the environments. The rigid presentation may be balked at by 3D-freedom hounds demanding full range as they explore their worlds, but the tradeoff here is what makes the game dense and painterly.

In battle, the game embraces more freedom of movement with its 3D combat, as four playable characters unite for various stages of combination attacks. You can map them out for direct control to your liking, setting individual party members into strategic locations to take advantage of their strengths and weakness. The battle system isn't meant to be too difficult—some complaints have focused on the feeling of button mashing scenarios—but there is an underlying complexity that keeps the energy level high. Fans of the original game will find obvious similarities—a pleasant oldschool vibe exists all around—enjoying new flavorings like the interesting leader system, which allows you to establish quicker, more divisive victories when properly utilized.



'The art style plays to more classic sensibilities, using the Norse mythologies for inspiration.'



Taking place centuries before the story in Valkyrie Profile, the game places its focus on the character of Alicia, a young princess who's imbued with the power to generate freeze crystals that trap enemies and establish little puzzle sequences. Silmeria, a valkyrie alluded to in the original narrative, has become a key figure, acting as a sort of spirit-like possessor of Alicia. It is her personal battle with the two parts of her soul that underpin the quest. **play**

System(s) PlayStation 2 | Publisher Namco Bandai Games
Developer STING | Available September

IGPX

Team Spirit

words **Dave Halverson**

In the year 2049, people have finally tired of watching endorsement-covered GMs speed through an endless succession of left turns (sorry McQueen), turning instead to the Immortal Grand Prix; 350-mph skating-mecha-racing battles that take place on 60 miles of suspended raceway built around the venue's very own (IGPX) city. In the Production I.G.-produced anime—among the most respected anime studios in the world—currently airing on Cartoon Network, the adventure begins as Team Satomi graduates from the IG-2 to the big leagues, the IG-1, but in the game we get to work through the entire ranking system from the bowels of the IG-3 up to IG-1.

Maybe NASCAR could try battle laps.

IGPX racing consists of two 3-person teams; each working together like a mechanized roller derby, staving off attacks, avoiding obstacles and going as fast as possible to cross the finish line first, and intact. Recreating the nuances of IGPX, developer Sting has opted to concentrate on high-speed strategy and battles over traditional racing, making IGPX quite unlike anything you've experienced. Racing for Team Satomi, Takeshi (played by Haley Joel Osment on TV) is the clear hot-shot of the trio—although, in order to assail the higher classes, the secret is in switching between team members and laying down a balanced attack depending on the opposing team's tactics. Sledge Mama, for instance, is all about laying the smack-down (you being the smack), while Skylark (the circuit's all-female squad) is more apt to use trickery and smooth maneuvering. The way this translates into gameplay, for the first two "battle" laps (of three) is via switching between Takeshi, Liz Ricarro (voiced by Michelle Rodriguez on TV) and Hynden Walsh (a young female pilot in constant communication with her talking cat), fighting, boosting, and performing evasive maneuvers until the final charge begins, where you let your super-boost fly and pray you've run a good race.

> "...In the game we get to work through the entire ranking system from the bowels of the IG-3 up to IG-1."

The game is still early (certain bells and whistles still need installation) but Sting seems well plugged in to what fans of the series want as well as racing gamers' appetite for something new. **play**

Systems:	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Sega	Available	September
Developer	Sega	Online/Multi:	NA	ESRB Rating	M

YAKUZA

Now with 20% less pinkie fingers!

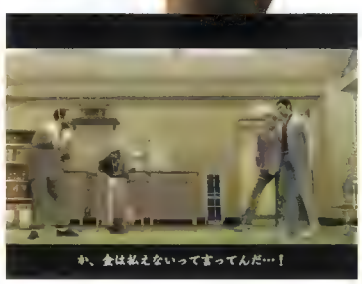
words Casey Loe

The Japanese version of Yakuza, the more intriguingly-titled Ryu ga Gotoku ("Like a Dragon"), debuted in December of last year to strong sales and nearly perfect scores from most media sources (including a 9.5 in Play). This story-driven, free-roaming brawler is a fantastic game—there's little controversy on that point. The only question now is: Can Sega avoid screwing up the U.S. release?

So far, things are looking good. Sega has thrown a ton of money at the voice cast, winning over relatively big names like Rachel Leigh Cook and Eliza Dushku. Both do a fine job, and headline-grabbing semi-stars Michael Madsen, Michael Rosenbaum and Mark Hamill bring three delightful flavors of crazy to their respective villain roles. The marquis names are all supporting parts, while the main character is voiced by an unsung no-name who does at least as well as his higher-billed co-stars. While it's disappointing that Sega couldn't fit the original Japanese voice track on the disc as a selectable option, it's hard to imagine that anyone will be dissatisfied with the effort put into the English version.

The script seems strong, although the translators may be trying a little too hard to work the F-word into every single sentence. (But I suppose it's not their fault that non-ethnic American thugs lack the wide range of colorful slang that so richly flavored the Japanese version. Shame on you for using the F-word as a crutch, American ne'er-do-wells!) Outside of the new text and voices, the localization team hasn't touched a thing. That's a decision I generally applaud, but I wouldn't mind a bit more cultural context in a game like this—it would be nice if Sega could expand the "profiles" menu to explain what goes on in a host club, why one should look for dog food in a store called Don Quixote, and how many hours of high-priced conversation one needs to endure before a cabaret club girl puts out.

Fortunately, you don't need to understand all the cultural nuances to thoroughly enjoy Yakuza. Crime novelist Seishu Hase has written a riveting tale that touches on every aspect of Japan's underworld (his specialty), but never lets the tale get bogged down in narration or go too long without a good fight scene. We'll be back with a full review of Yakuza before its September release, but it's safe to say that this will be one of the year's PS2 highlights.



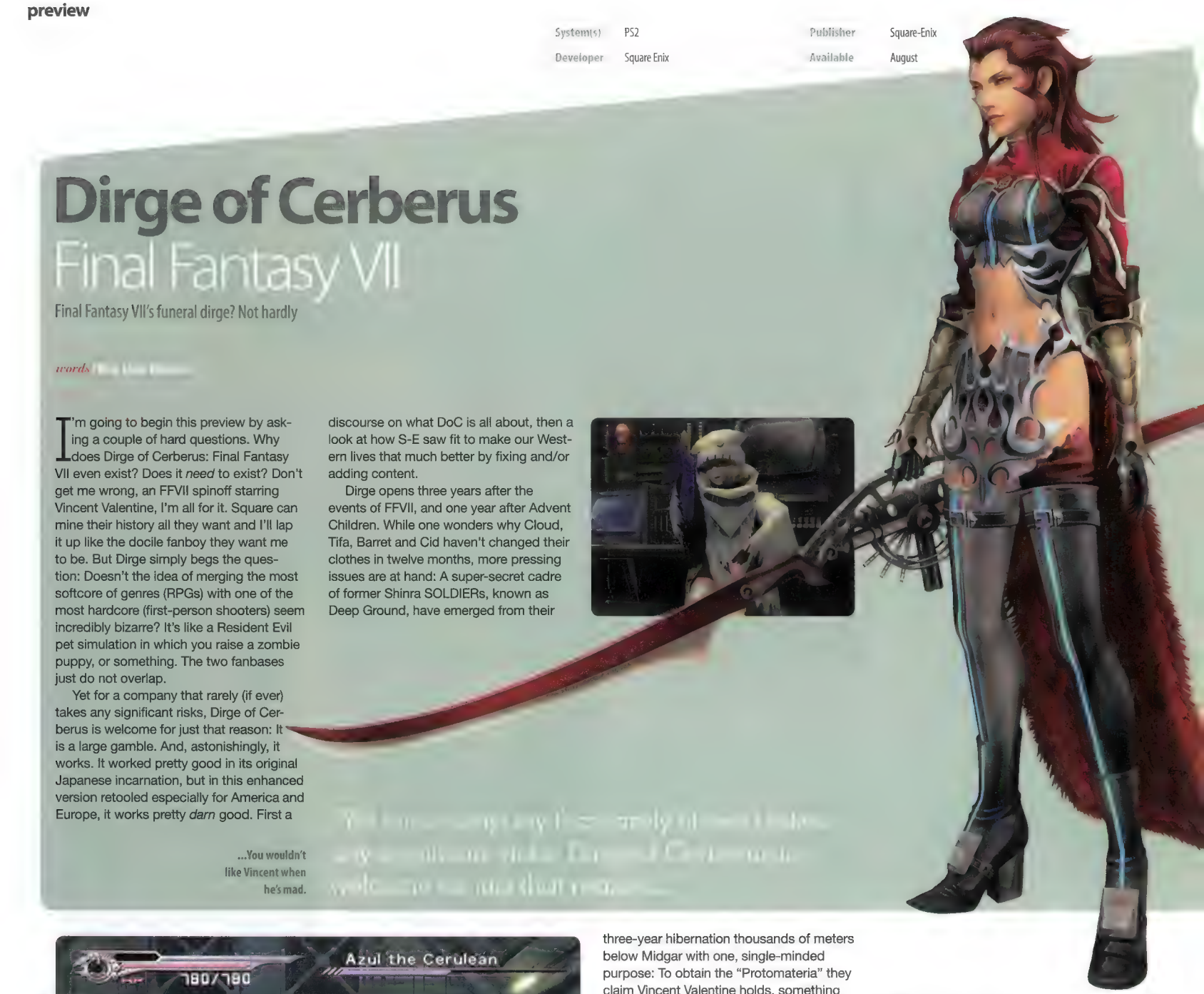
"...the localization team hasn't touched a thing. That's a decision I generally applaud..."

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Square-Enix
Developer	Square Enix	Available	August

Dirge of Cerberus
Final Fantasy VII

Final Fantasy VII's funeral dirge? Not hardly

words / Ray Uzo Barnes



I'm going to begin this preview by asking a couple of hard questions. Why does Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII even exist? Does it *need* to exist? Don't get me wrong, an FFVII spinoff starring Vincent Valentine, I'm all for it. Square can mine their history all they want and I'll lap it up like the docile fanboy they want me to be. But Dirge simply begs the question: Doesn't the idea of merging the most softcore of genres (RPGs) with one of the most hardcore (first-person shooters) seem incredibly bizarre? It's like a Resident Evil pet simulation in which you raise a zombie puppy, or something. The two fanbases just do not overlap.

Yet for a company that rarely (if ever) takes any significant risks, Dirge of Cerberus is welcome for just that reason: It is a large gamble. And, astonishingly, it works. It worked pretty good in its original Japanese incarnation, but in this enhanced version retooled especially for America and Europe, it works pretty *darn* good. First a discourse on what DoC is all about, then a look at how S-E saw fit to make our Western lives that much better by fixing and/or adding content.

Dirge opens three years after the events of FFVII, and one year after Advent Children. While one wonders why Cloud, Tifa, Barret and Cid haven't changed their clothes in twelve months, more pressing issues are at hand: A super-secret cadre of former Shinra SOLDIERs, known as Deep Ground, have emerged from their three-year hibernation thousands of meters below Midgar with one, single-minded purpose: To obtain the "Protomateria" they claim Vincent Valentine holds, something he himself is not even aware of. An elite unit within Deep Ground, Tsviyet (Russian for "Color") wants this mysterious, powerful materia for unknown purposes...but with the word "Omega" on everyone's lips, it can't be anything good.

...You wouldn't like Vincent when he's mad.

The story of Dirge is unusual in that it is remarkably faithful to the legacy of FFVII, and does nothing to tarnish it (although there are a few glaring retcon issues, such as the fateful Protomateria). The game even explains why Yuffie and Vincent weren't in FFVII's ending, turning their absence into a crucial plot point involving an old enemy. Obviously the story is solidly Vincent's, and you should know up front that no VII characters other than Yuffie and Cait Sith make more than cameos.

They don't need to, however. I didn't think Vincent was really main character material -- his character arc was simple (immortal man left to ever ponder his failed relationship with lost lover Lucrecia), but by the time the credits roll on Dirge you'll be considering him one of the most hardcore gaming badasses of all time. I'm not even kidding. He even makes it well into Cloud territory, boosted greatly by something so awesome that happens in the last stage that...ah, but I get ahead of myself.

Dirge of Cerberus' gameplay is best described as a fusion of an FPS, Devil May Cry-esque action, and an RPG. The FPS bit is the main chunk, but as in Resident Evil 4 your camera is generally slightly off-center behind your character. You go into first-person mode for sniping, but generally you'll always have your eyes on Vincent's swirling red cape. The DMC-like portion is general movement, jumping and hand-

"Does the synthesis of RPG and FPS work? Oh yeah, it works really well..."

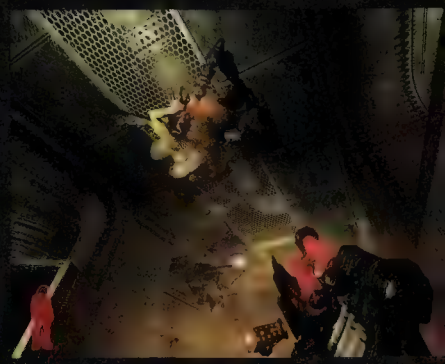
Dirge has it share of beauties, although some are quite the beast.

to-hand combat -- you only enter "FPS" mode when you whip out your guns, and the transition is seamless. Dirge's RPG origins are served by a dramatically deep gun customization scheme, inspired by FFVII's Materia System. Also available are traditional FF items, handily accessible any time via the D-pad (movement is the left stick, aiming the right), and upon clearing one of the (very long, and very numerous) stages, you get the option to exchange your EXP for gil (i.e. weapon customization) or level-ups (i.e. stat boosts). This unique idea allows for two radically differing play-styles, or anything in between: Power up your pistol, rifle or machinegun for mass carnage, or boost Vincent's HP and stats to beef up defense?

Now I'd like to take a moment and tell you just how much Square Enix has improved this game for American release. It's really quite astounding. Leaving a whole slew of extra, non-story-based missions aside, virtually everything relating to the gameplay has been tweaked for the better. One could say that Dirge is now the game it always wanted to be -- you move faster with guns aimed, you have a double-jump, melee attacks are completely rejiggered, now allowing for mid-air strikes, the camera is placed further behind Vincent, limit breaks and magic have been separated into two entities, any weapon can now be used as a sniper rifle, and an amazingly useful knockdown roll has been added, allowing you to escape from the enemy's clutches and not get pounded while on the ground...a major gripe I had about the Japanese version of the game. There's really so much new and fixed that it's almost ridiculous -- I'm going on the record now to say that I'm sure S-E will re-release this enhanced version in Japan as Dirge of Cerberus International. They'd almost be fools not to.

The localization is also classic Square Enix quality, with all of the actors from Advent Children returning to voice their characters. No complaints whatsoever -- besides some minor lipsync issues, unavoidable when going from one language to another, every character's voice fits their character perfectly. This is a story every FFVII fan is going to need to experience, but how is the *game?* Does the synthesis of RPG and FPS work? Oh yeah, it works really well. We will review Dirge of Cerberus next issue. **play**

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Human Head	Available	July

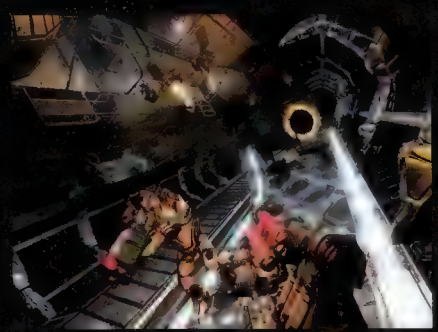


"We wanted a nasty, goopy, organic look."

Chris Rhinehart, project lead

PREY

First-person shooting with something different to offer?



words Brady Fiechter

There's a constant clamor for innovation right now, but so rare is true innovation that a creative spin on old ideas becomes sound replacement. Prey is a first-person shooter comfortably settled in the Doom 3 engine, serving up its action and mood-driven imagery in all the ways you'd expect. But finally getting the chance to jump into the action and see the wall walk and portal transportation dynamic come to life, you get the sense of a game with some admirably fresh ideas bringing new gravity to the familiar.

Actually, with the wall walk mechanic, gravity is literally being toyed with in the game world, as entire sections of the ship shift around you as you walk on walls and ceilings. With the flip of a switch, enemies can be dropped to their death, puzzles solved, shootouts taken to a disorienting level of strategy. "Wall walk worked from day one of the game design," says Chris Rhinehart, project lead. "It worked so well that we threw out other designs just to focus on it."

As an escaped prisoner on an alien ship that just got done sweeping up loads of humans and everything else in their wake on Earth, you're caught in a shadowy place of creepy anachronistic technology. "We wanted a nasty, goopy, organic look," says Rhinehart. Complimenting the impressive visuals is a network of portals that serve as transportation around the massive construct, called a Dyson sphere. One second you're in a long corridor battling giant Hunters, the next you're leaping through a portal to a computer room run by lifeless drones who pay no attention to your feeble existence. It's disorienting at times, creating neat avenues for instant shakeups in gameplay and location that keep you on your toes. In one impressive scene, you come across an entire asteroid locked in a case in miniature form on the other side of a portal. Warping there puts you into an entirely different sense of scale, punctuated by an enemy that comes peeking up to the glass.

Prey's use of creative scenery and environmental situations seems to be one of its major strong suits, but even the weapons hold especial interest in their creative designs. Again, there doesn't seem to be too much variation from the effects of the firepower you'd be expecting in a straight first-person shooter, but it's just damn cool to see, say, a sniper rifle become its weapon type while a spindly, pulsating tentacle extends from the gun and jams into your eye for the sight. The feel of Prey is right, and the story structure of a Native American brushing with spiritual enlightenment in his reluctant role as hero grabs my interest even further. **play**

The level design takes you to some vertiginous heights.

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC	Publisher	Namco Bandai Games
Developer	Smart Bomb	Available	Fall

Snoopy vs. the Red Baron

America's prodigal pooch takes to the skies

Dave Halverson

"The art's great, the soundtrack fits like a collar and the gameplay has a nice arcade feel..."

System(s)	PlayStation 2, GameCube	Publisher	Midway
Developer	High Voltage	Available	September

"Whether you're 5 or 45, this is phenomenal entertainment...If you don't like it, you've gone and grown up."

Dave Halverson

If cartoons have always been a barometer of where the collective viewers' heads are at, then The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy couldn't be more apropos, because we've all gone a little crazy—crazy enough to follow a sitcom about two children living with the Grim Reaper; one pure, yellow-haired cruelty, and the other so dimwitted he makes regular dimwits look like rocket scientists. Whether you're 5 or 45, this is *phenomenal* entertainment. If you don't like it, you've gone and grown up. Report to your neighborhood Dockers dealer at once.

Making a game of it, Midway have chosen the 'toon-to-game road most traveled; fighting, via mission mode, or multiplayer. Only they've patterned their game—even more so than previous anime licenses—after Power Stone. I've lost count of how many games P-Stone has inspired, but it's up there, and for good reason... multiple-setting-ass-whooping is big fun!

For these proceedings, the show's creators have developed an original story where Grim's mojo ball trunk has been burgled, unleashing the power of his balls on anyone who comes in contact with them, filling them with supernatural rage, in supernatural settings, which I believe is the recipe for chaos. The gist is to fight, jump, and dash about while grabbing guns, bombs, flame-throwers, bashing instruments, toxic waste, or whatever works to beat the crap out of the opposing team or assailant, while avoiding their attacks, environmental hazards, and collecting as many mojo balls as possible. Collect enough balls and you can perform a punch-pelting airborne combo, or when an enemy is stunned, a button-patterned mojo rage finishing move. The longer a fight goes on, the more ground (sets) it covers, and you're not alone. You're joined by what appear to be massive bosses (sometimes are), but are usually mojo-tainted tools of destruction. Provided they're not chasing or trying to kill you, you can mount gigantic creatures, mechs, and other freaks of nature and use your mojo to bake opponents. There are also throws, traps, and all manner of interactive elements, along with the kind of trash-talking and cinemas only a Billy & Mandy fan could love. Every last cast member gets into the act too (15 in all) and is voiced by his, her, or its TV counterpart. I sure am glad Grim lost that limbo contest!

What has one eye, one great big gooey ball, and shoots to kill?

Bomberman: Act Zero

Zero Tolerance...

System(s)	Xbox 360	Developer	Konami
Publisher	Hudson	Available	August

The cutesy, diminutive, and super-deformed Bomberman of the past has been given his walking papers. Bomberman: Act Zero replaces the classic game hero with an armored human.

This is Bomberman for the next generation of game consoles, a more adult-oriented affair with pounding rock music, horrific screams when enemies are killed, and gunmetal gray environments paying homage to the grim, futuristic worlds of Phillip K. Dick, William Gibson, and Aldous Huxley.

Gameplay, as ever, remains largely unchanged. Bomberman enters a maze filled with destructible and non-destructible blocks and must dispatch his foes by blowing them up with bombs. Powerups allow Bomberman to increase his bombs' destructive power, move more quickly through mazes, and restore some of his health. If things aren't settled in relatively short order, the game moves into a "sudden death" mode, dropping blocks onto open spaces in the maze and forcing a conclusion.

For Act Zero, developer Hudson has included two separate single-player modes. The misleadingly named First-Person Bomber style takes place in the third-person perspective and features 99 levels of gameplay. Here, Bomberman is given health points and, thus, the ability to survive more than one blast. This mode also features an adjustable camera, with the Xbox 360's triggers used to zoom in on, and pull back from, the action, and the right analog stick used to swing the view around or tilt it up and down. The camera controls function flawlessly, but it must be noted the game's action is so frantic and the need to see what the opposition is up to is so great, that constant readjustment of the view is all but inevitable.

Neither first-person bomber mode nor its fixed-camera, one-hit-kills counterpart single battle particularly shines. Bomberman has traditionally been strong with its multiplayer offerings and weak with its solitary modes. Zero is no exception to this rule. Its artificial intelligence-run foes are easily trapped and almost always killed within seconds of Zero's sudden death segments. It's also depressing to note the great frequency with which the A.I. Bombermen blow themselves up.

Worse still, single-player is almost an afterthought here; in one of the oddest moves ever, the game only saves to Xbox Live 360 servers, and has no offline multiplayer component. Moreover, single-player progress is not charted at all, and if Bomberman dies in either first-person bomber mode or single battle, he must start afresh from level one.

With eight players on Xbox Live, Zero's sins can largely be forgiven. On Xbox Live, there's enough magic and mayhem to be had (complete with voice chat and the ability to boot complete jerks from the room) that this new Bomberman finds himself redeemed. But just barely.

Greg Orlando

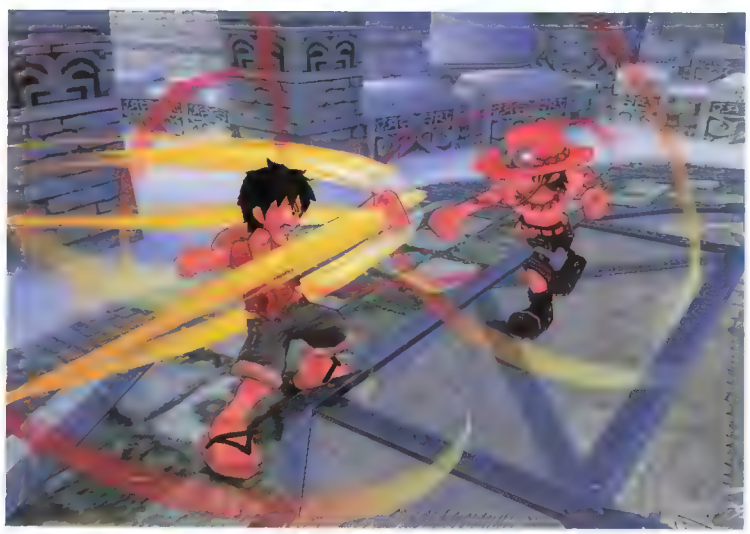
One Piece: Grand Adventure

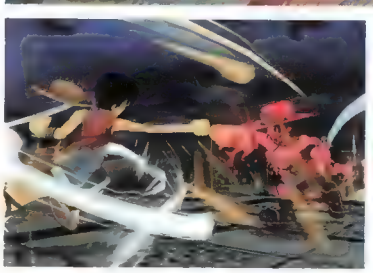
More to pillage

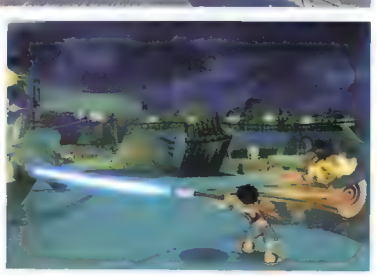
System(s)	PlayStation 2, GameCube	Developer	Ganbarian
Publisher	Namco Bandai	Available	Fall 2006

Last year's One Piece: Grand Battle took the weird and wacky cast of the anime series, slapped them into various situations of crazed combat, and had them battle it out for the sick pleasure of you, the player. Developer Ganbarian returns to that idea with One Piece: Grand Adventure; this isn't feeling so much like a whole new game as it is an upgrade and expansion of what we got before. The roster of familiar faces has been beefed up, with newcomers like Princess Vivi and Tashigi included in the 24 main characters, and 50+ support characters are now present to be called upon while in the heat of battle. A nice addition to the single player side of the game is the Adventure mode, where you pick a captain and sail around from island to island, recruiting new crew members while also searching for treasure. Of course, multi-player mayhem is still an important factor, with a slew of battle, tournament, and mini-game options present. I do wish there was a way for me to convince Namco Bandai to slap in a fixed camera option before the release of the U.S. version, however–the constantly rotating camera had me reaching for the Advil.

Eric Patterson







Turok (working title)

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Buena Vista Games
Developer	Propaganda Games	**Available**	2007

There are loads of impressive first-person shooters and action games in the next-gen pipeline, but keep your eyes peeled for Turok (Joseph Turok that is) in particular. Lost in space and hunted by his nemesis's minions as well as hungry (and frighteningly intelligent) dinosaurs, the new game incorporates team tactics, stealth, and of course all of the action, adventure and carnage thrill-seeking game junkies live for. *DH*

Virtua Tennis 3

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Sega
Developer	Sega	**Available**	Spring 2007

With Virtua Tennis 3, Sega's got the obvious covered: new depths of facial detail and character animations for the licensed players, along with newly rendered courts. Career mode continues to be the focus of the gameplay, with new mini games joining a more robust create a player option to keep your fantasy of confronting the greats of the game alive. *BF*

Fatal Inertia

System(s)	PlayStation 3	**Publisher**	Koei
Developer	Koei Canada	**Available**	November

Crafted by Koei's new Canadian studio, Fatal Inertia's a sci-fi racer set in the 23rd Century, where western themes blend with futuristic aesthetics. Weapons combat drives the competition, taking advantage of next-generation physics routines for environmental and vehicle interaction. Vehicles are customizable, built to your extreme specifications for online play. *BF*

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

System(s)	Wii	**Publisher**	Nintendo
Developer	Nintendo	**Available**	Q1 2007

Its slip out of the launch window is unfortunate, but Series Creator Masahiro Sakurai is promising a brawl worth waiting for, featuring classic control. Yes indeed, no need to stand about waving your arms for this one. SSBB will use the Wii controller. Look for character-endemic moves galore and tons of new devices too, along with Wi-Fi and online playability. *DH*

Eureka Seven V1: The New Wave

System(s)	PlayStation 2	**Publisher**	Bandai Namco Games
Developer	BEC	**Available**	October

E7 dropped in just in time for an hour or so of play time. Don't come looking for familiar faces (New Wave takes place several years after the anime), however, the anime staff have had a hand in the game, developing the story and impressive anime sequences. Somewhat like Raxhephon, E7 is an action-RPG putting you in control of an LFO (morphing mech), and of course, lifting: riding currents like a snowboarder in the sky. Other than (once again) no walking animation, things seem five by five, so far. *DH*

They're ba-ack...

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System(s)	PC, Xbox 360	Publisher	SouthPeak
Developer	Artificial Studios	Available	Q1 2007

Things that go Bang! in the night

A Monster interview with Artificial Studios' president & lead developer **Jeremy Stieglitz**

Four for the road.

Interview

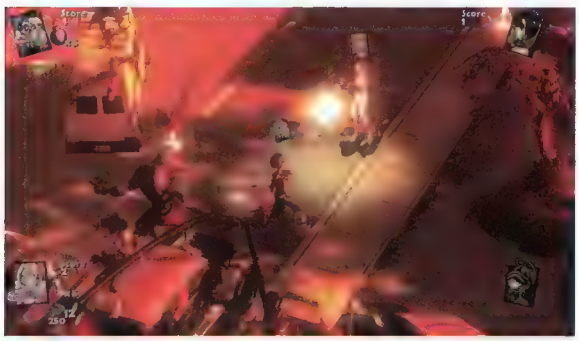
Few things are as satisfying as sitting back watching each one of your favorite genres get its generational overhaul, and top-down action takes to this particular generation like zombies to shotgun shells. We began evangelizing Monster Madness in 2005 when screens began to trickle in from the UK, but now that SouthPeak has moved in as the US publisher we can start to get excited. Playing a few levels of the game, it's clear that Artificial are onto something seriously entertaining whether you're alone or with a few freaky friends, which is exactly how Monster Madness begins...

play: You've been working on Monster Madness for a while now haven't you? I know I've been pimping it for like a year.
We started working on the game in July 2005, on a custom-built game engine that was oriented towards the PC. For a while, Monster Madness was on the backburner while we worked on other projects (namely CelliFactor). Now it's June 2006, and Monster Madness is running on Epic's Unreal Engine 3 which incidentally required a complete reimplementation of the game starting in April 2006. Around that time we also hooked up with the game's publisher, SouthPeak Interactive, and they've been incredibly supportive. So yeah, it has been a crazy year, moving from PC to console development, and one technology platform to another.

Did development begin on 360 or was it originally earmarked for PC?
It was all PC for a long time, though we prototyped the whole game (on our custom engine) using Xbox 360 controllers for Windows. To this day I wonder what other games will actually use that controller on the PC... hmmm.

The game reminds me of a modern day version of the 16-bit great, Zombies Ate my Neighbors. Any inspiration there?
You bet. Almost everyone here has fond memories of Zombies: the joy of co-op play, the powerful beast you could transform into and the zombie babies! Man, that game was fun! Aside from Zombies, there have been a lot of games over the years which stand as inspiration for the action in Monster Madness: Smash TV, Contra, Loaded, even Ikari Warriors. But in recent years, the top-down shooter genre has been somewhat underserved on consoles, so we're looking to bring this esteemed genre back while updating it for the next generation!

Will players get an equally great game regardless of whether or not they play single-player offline, multiplayer, deathmatch or capture the flag? Have you had time to put in and refine a nice, big single-player adventure?
We're working hard to give the game a lot of content for all types of players. [Deep Breath] For the solo or local group of players, we have the meaty Campaign Adventure (more on that later). When



Jennifer lights up the night. How do you like your zombie cooked?

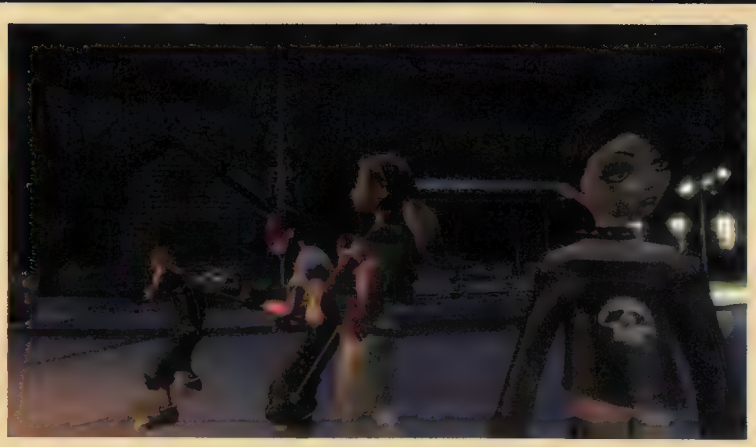
they're tired of cooperating, they can blast each other in the various 4-player deathmatch arenas (which have fixed camera perspectives, similar to Smash Brothers). For the online gamer, we have an additional set of cooperative levels and the 4-player deathmatch arenas, as well as a set of large CTF and Team Deathmatch levels for up to 16 players, which include all manner of vehicles, gun mounts, and environmental hazards. [End Deep Breath]
Now about the Campaign Adventure mode, it's pretty large as each level will take on average 30 minutes to beat, and there are 25 levels in the works, leading us to a playtime of about 12.5 hours – and that is just for that mode. In addition, there are a lot of incentives to play it through multiple times: the in-game cinematics are different depending on which characters you have in play, you can re-play previous levels with your upgraded weaponry to thrash formerly difficult monsters or just acquire more items, and there are 4 difficulty modes each of which will unlock a unique set of alternate player models when completed. Furthermore, to build the best weapons in the game (and upgrade all the weapons to their maximum levels), you need to find Rare Weapon Parts, which only exist on the highest levels at the harder difficulty levels. So the idea is, you won't complete 100% of the game on a single run-through, but rather it will take a couple passes to max out everything. Finally, if you beat the game on Very Hard mode, you'll get to see a special ending.

I notice that to really excel at the game one needs to make use of the environment. Was this a key design element in the game's development?
Definitely - our goal throughout the game's development (and more going forward) has been to make the environment a critical factor during combat. For example, you may opt to blow up an explosive barrel when a bunch of enemies are near it (not so original), but how about dodging zombie-driven cars, out-of-control buzzsaws, or possessed lawn-mowers? Furthermore, we're using AGEIA PhysX (with optional PhysX hardware support on the PC) to create lots of nifty physics-related gameplay elements, dynamically breakable objects (you'll see a ton of this when you tear up Zack's House in the first level of the game), drivable vehicles, ragdolls, lots of monster tokens bouncing all over the place. Some of the enemies are also totally physics-based, such as the headless priest who rolls his head around like a bowling ball, trying to trip you up, and some of the weapons are (basketballs, razor-tipped CD projectiles). Needless to say, the game's setting gives us a lot of creative freedom in this regard.

> "...we're looking to bring this esteemed genre back while updating it for the next generation!"
>
> **Jeremy Stieglitz** Lead Developer

I also like the option to play dual-analog zoomed-out or traditional 3rd-person. How did this come about?
Some old-school gamers (like me) prefer a traditional top-down view for this kind of action game, so that we can see in all horizontal directions. But over the last 5 years, the third-person-style chase camera has been used in so many games that some players prefer to have the view (more or less) behind their character. In order to accommodate both preferences we added both views and while they play slightly differently, they balance out. With top-down camera, you can't see quite as far forward, yet you can see what's behind your character. Conversely with the chase-camera, you get a bit more view distance, but naturally you're blind to what's going on behind you.

I've had access to a fraction of the game and can't wait to see more. How do the levels themselves change and progress? Do they get bigger, more diverse? How does the gameplay evolve over time?
We're working on a wide variety of environments for the game, along with unique objectives and scenarios for



each level in the game, the goal being to keep players on their toes throughout the entire campaign. The first level in the campaign is "Zack's House", which basically involves a marauding band of zombies busting through the walls of your home, and ransacking it while you try to defend yourself with whatever you can find. You run around this arena-style level, grab a plunger, a saw, or a variety of other household weapons and try to survive the horrific onslaught for a pre-determined amount of time. There are also a bunch of traps in "Zack's House" which you can use to your advantage, such as a pool of water with electric wires dangling into it... anyway, this "hold the fort" mission is very different from the second mission in the game, named "Streets of Suburbia", which is a much more "progression-oriented" level where you make your way through a series of monster confrontations before taking on a mini-boss (Fat Zombie) at level's end. Going further into the game, you'll play through levels which are more exploratory in nature, or puzzle-oriented, or a straight-up gauntlet of bosses and specific challenges. Finally, there will be some "bonus" levels strewn throughout the game that involve clever use of vehicles...

As for the greater campaign, you've seen the Suburban environment. Next up, you'll make your way to the Shopping Maul, where you're going to encounter Zombie Bikers, Deranged Clowns, Ghouls (nasty monsters that have "people" growing out of their backs), and the dreaded Mr. Huggles, among quite a few other beasties. Then it's off to "High School Hell", the Cemetery & Haunted Forest, and finally the Vampire's Castle.

Every monster you encounter has a unique AI behavior and set of attacks, so while the regular Zombies just run at you without regard to their own safety, you'll find that "Fire Imps" are much more cowardly and try to avoid direct melee combat, instead preferring to lob great balls o' fire at you from a distance (while they dance around mocking you). Meanwhile, some enemies like to call on back-up, so when a Martian's not firing ray-gun blasts, he might call down his UFO to provide extra firepower (and maybe even abduct you). We're having a lot of fun with the AI and enemy attacks, to be sure.

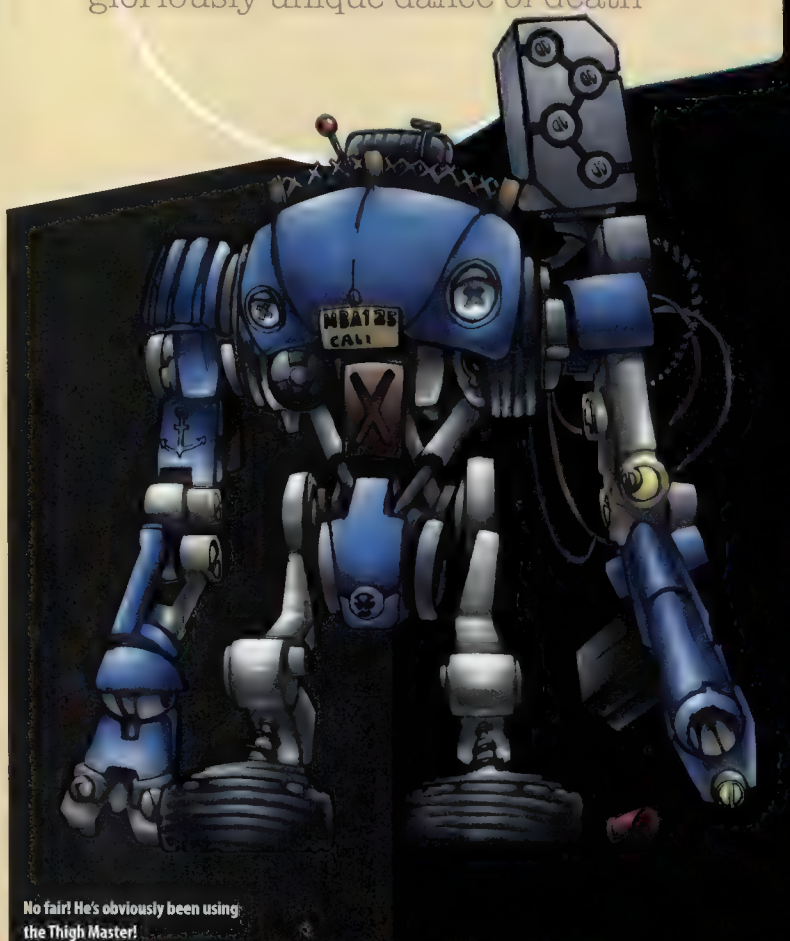
Over the course of the game, your character really becomes more powerful not in the sense of stat-based "leveling up" (which I tend to find a generic grind in some RPGs), but rather you'll build bigger and better weapons which can deal increasing sorts of punishments to your enemies. By the end of the game, when you're loaded up with dual-SMGs, a laser sword, a mystical boom-box, and a gigantic fireworks launcher, you're ready to take on some serious trouble!

Finally, for considerable expense you can purchase "Monster Transformation" pendants which allow your character to physically transform into various monster incarnations of his or herself. These monster forms allow you to access an alternate set of monster-specific attacks, and will be real life-savers in a pinch. The Monster Transformations and abilities that we're currently working on are: Werewolf (speed & slashing power), Zombie (invincibility & puking power), Demon (speed & magic power), Vampire (flight & vampiric drain), Frankensteins (raw strength & lightning attacks). These monster forms appear specific to your character, so it's pretty amusing to see what, say, a Frankenstein Jennifer looks like.

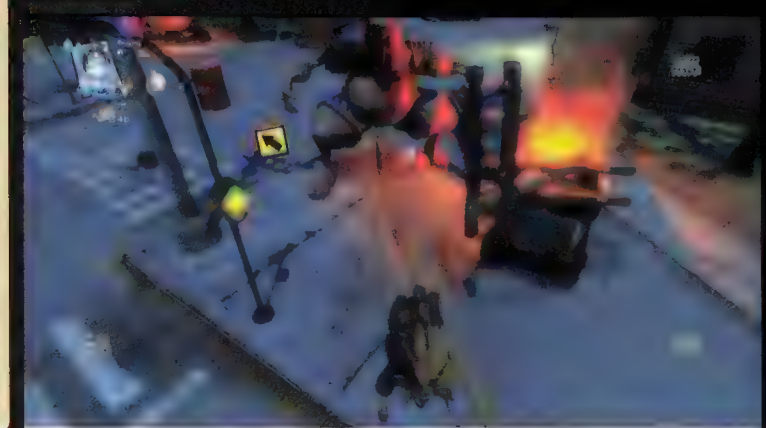
How integral is finding parts to fashion weapons? Have you balanced the game in such a way that players prone to explore will be greatly rewarded?

Finding parts is essential to building & upgrading weapons: all weapon upgrades cost a certain number of different types of Weapon Parts. If you don't have enough parts (of the necessary types specified by "Larry Tools", the weapons smithy), then you don't get weapons. However, I should be specific here: you build RANGED weapons, that is, various types of "guns". You can find "melee weapons" (swords, axes, baseball bats and the like) strewn throughout the environment, and take them with you as you please. So

"...we're putting a ton of effort into the boss fights to ensure that each one is a gloriously unique dance of death"



No fair! He's obviously been using the Thigh Master!



while you can probably survive purely on melee weapons that you happen to find, you're only going to be a real powerhouse if you take the time to build big guns for yourself, and that requires the Weapon Parts. To find them, you have to explore the environment, look in backyards, under trees, and in trash bins. We're also in the process of adding lots of destructible elements which randomly drop Weapon Parts upon breaking, encouraging you to take your time to smash up the environment while you explore it. We're still in the core production phase, so the ultimate balancing has yet to be done, but rest assured that some of the BEST weapons and maximum upgrades will only be achievable by thorough exploration, especially of the toughest levels on the hardest difficulties.

Does the enemy AI change depending on how many players are playing, from 1-4?
Yes, some of the monsters do try to mix it up when multiple players are in the game. Not zombies, they're too stupid and will just attack whoever is closest. But the Werewolf for example will attempt to evenly distribute his attacks between players, so as to weaken all of them before he goes in for the kill. We're definitely working to make every player who's in game feel some pressure during combat, never to feel too safe. That said, from a difficulty standpoint, the game does get easier right now with 4 players, so we're probably going to add more monsters when there are more players, to balance it out.
The music is fantastic, kind of horror camp. Does this pervade throughout the entire game or does it get more ominous?
Afshin Toufighian is our musician, and he's been doing a brilliant job of balancing action, suspense, and plain ol' camp throughout the tunes that he's composed. While there will be psuedo-scary portions in some of the game's later environments, it will always remain balanced along that fine line of comedy, horror, and action. Our goal with the music is this: keep your adrenaline pumping even while you're chuckling and reeling at the fact that some zombie just puked on you.

What can we expect in the way of effects and bosses? What would you say will blow top-down gaming fans away most about MM?
Unreal Engine 3 provides us with a lot of graphics horsepower to work with, so from a visual FX standpoint we're looking at full dynamic lighting, soft-shadowing, normal-mapping, specular highlighting, environment reflection, and post-process FX such as High Dynamic Range rendering "light bloom". It's been great to work with this technology, and we're still just sinking our teeth into it. UE3 also has a killer particle FX editor, which we're now using to create all sorts of wicked attacks for the various enemies and weapons in the game, whether it's the solid jet of fire from a flamethrower or a shower of zombie giblets. As for the bosses... I can't discuss them all just yet, but we're putting a ton of effort into the boss fights to ensure that each one is a gloriously unique dance of death. Every boss will have his unique attack patterns, behaviors, and weaknesses, and there will be a ton of them in this game, sometimes one right after another (just like good ol' Contra). Whether it's "Bob Zombie" trying to catch you in his voodoo spell, or "Granny" tossing poisonous veggies and randy cats at you, every boss encounter is being invested with a lot of personality and tender loving care!

Although unpopulated, I had to jump into CTF and tool around in that awesome dune buggy. What other types of vehicles are in the game?
A lot: a tank, a mech, a bumper kart, even a UFO, and more. Each one will have its own unique set of weapons and method of movement, since Monster Madness's lead programmer, David Sleeper, also handled all the physics programming for CellFactor. We like vehicles because they make you feel uber-powerful against your pedestrian foes, and encourage cooperation. Some levels will be entirely based around vehicles, other times you may randomly find them or lease them for use from "Larry Tools". In online multiplayer (or system link), they are especially useful when assaulting the enemy base. Every 16-player online level will have a unique set of vehicles available for use in it.

Are the characters evenly balanced or do they each have specific strengths and weaknesses?
To keep things fair, and not punish your little brother for being stuck playing as "Jennifer", the playable characters only differ in one respect: their special abilities. Every character has a type of "melee weapon" which they like the best. You'll notice this when you go to pick up that weapon (or switch to it), big exclamation marks appear above your character's head. Zack (the geek) prefers Axe-type weapons, Carrie (the Goth chick) prefers Sword-type weapons, Jennifer (the cheerleader) prefers dual-weapons, Andy (the skater dude) likes random stuff. When you are using your character's "specialty"-type of weapon, as these favorite types are called, you get a "Combo Meter" which can be filled up through whacking enemies. When it is filled all the way, you can unleash a special move that's unique to your character (and sometimes, to the specific weapon that you're wielding). These special moves are quite different in what they do, for example, Jennifer spins around like ballerina, creating a tornado that sucks nearby enemies in, while Andy wildly bounces around the environment kicking everything out of his way. That's the only gameplay-oriented difference between the characters, but everyone usually finds a character they like because they prefer a special move and a type of melee weapon. That said, the in-game cinematics will also vary slightly depending on which character(s) you're playing as, so there's reason to play through the game with different characters (or with all of them at once).

I love the smell of neon and zombie breath in the morning!

Will you integrate comic book-style cut-scenes throughout the game like the one that introduces the story?
Absolutely. We love comic books and feel that they're the best way to tell the game's nutty story, so plenty more of them are in the works to book-end all the major events of the game. There are also some amusingly-animated in-game cinematic sequences, but the meat & potatoes of the storyline will be told through these voice-acted comic sequences.

So, when will it be ready? I want more!
March 2007, unless we all become zombified from overwork... mmm brains (& potatoes). **play**

"Every monster you encounter has a unique AI behavior and set of attacks."

Marked the Spot

A look back at Microsoft's seminal games console

We're a diverse bunch here at **play**. With editors in San Francisco, Seattle, Tokyo, Montreal, and SoCal, our loyalties fall like rain; no two drops quite alike. I was the Xbox whore. This is my story.

Words **Dave Halverson**

Back in November of 2001, Microsoft was about as cool as taking your mom to the prom. That the company has been able to sell through 25-plus-million systems isn't nearly as big a feat as how deeply they've managed to burrow into American pop culture, appearing everywhere from prime-time TV to professional sports, sitcoms, concert tours (and tour buses), auto racing, and just about any other venue where product placement is apropos. From Liz Phair song lyrics to massive parties in the middle of the desert, the nerdiest company on Earth has become one of the coolest...all on one box: their first. The biggest question pre-launch wasn't whether or not the console would be powerful; it was whether or not console people would accept it. After reattaching my jaw post-Halo, playing games like JSRF and Gun Valkyrie, I couldn't wipe the grin off my face, and I've been smiling ever since.

Sure, Sony did it with the PlayStation, but Sony has always stood for style; these guys made an OS and flight simulators before Xbox. Now you can pimp out your 360. That's progress. The Microsoft booths at pre-2001 trade shows were populated by guys with protractors in their pocket protectors, now it resembles a commune for coolness that might lift off and hover back to the mother-ship. As the last few Xbox games trickle into retail, looking back at the console's exclusive content is a bittersweet experience. I'm not sure I'm even ready to let go, even after all the times it's reminded me that my disc is dirty or damaged.

BEST OF

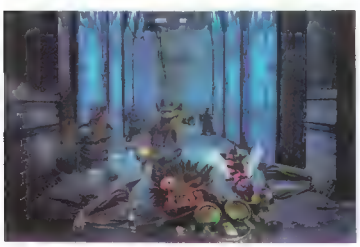
Only on Xbox

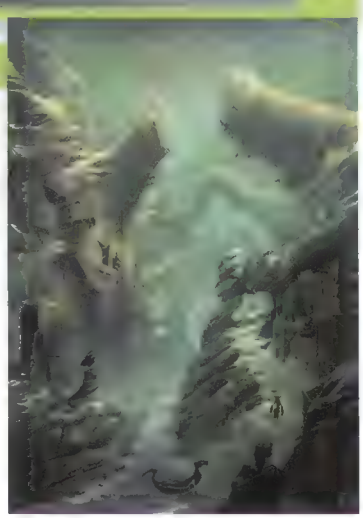
*limited to console games. Some games appeared on PC.

The Epics

Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath

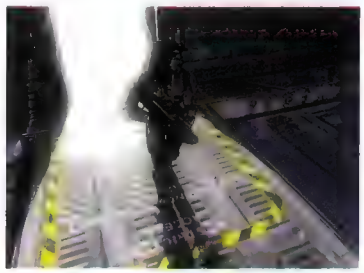
Games this unique and special are the rarest commodity in gaming. There's only a handful of games ever made that can hold a candle to it. I'll never forget my time with Stranger, especially on and around the river. Thank you Oddworld, wherever you are.





Fable

Unforgettable Adventures



Halo and Halo 2

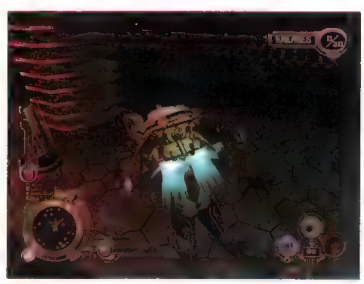
The first Halo flew so far under the radar it didn't even get a cover. The second broke retail sales history. The third, along with the feature film, will probably get its own holiday. Halo is a movement.

Jade Empire

When they weren't making history with Star Wars, BioWare was busy crafting a mystical martial-arts epic that stands as one of the most detailed, multi-faceted, and lush American RPGs ever created.

Gunstar Heroes

The makers of Jet Set Radio and Panzer Dragoon turned their attention, just this once, to 3D action, platforming, and science fiction reserved for the nimblest of gamers. To become one with GV is to know you're an elite gamer.



Kingdom Under Fire: Crusaders and Heroes

Ninja Gaiden

So hard…so very hard…but easily the most perfect action game ever made. It took forever to make, takes forever to master, and stands as a testament to Team Ninja's otherworldly skills in character design and pattern-based euphoria.

Armed and Dangerous

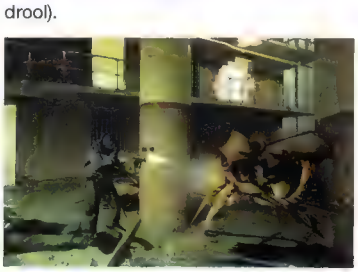
Over the mountains we went, merrily launching land sharks and black holes. Planet Moon's Monty Python-like opus should have launched an empire. I'll never laugh and have this much fun at the same time again.

Doom 3

Only one console could contain it and we're all so very happy it did…happy and urine-stained.

Half-Life 2

See Doom 3 (only replace the urine with drool).



Star Wars KOTOR and Sith

BioWare created two epics worthy of among the greatest franchises in human history and its many millions of fans.

Panzer Dragoon Orta

The Panzer Dragoon saga drew its last breath on Xbox, but it was a skyward adventure that anyone who experienced it will never forget.

The Chronicles of Riddick

Starbreeze (now hard at work on The Darkness) showed the world two things: wall-to-wall normal-mapping and first/third-person integration. They also made one of the best Xbox games, period.

Platformers

Jet Set Radio Future

The only game to combine dance, graffiti, action, racing, and extreme platforming remains one-of-a-kind and among my favorite games of all-time. Smilebit is in tatters after the Sega Japan re-org, so we may never see another game like it. Hard to fathom.

Tork

Fresh from Ubisoft's Montreal Studios, Tiwak's premiere prehistoric platformer Tork was picked up as a first-party game, then dropped...then picked up again when they rejoined Ubisoft, only to trickle out as a value title. A simple, yet momentous platformer, if you missed it, go find it.

Voodoo Vince

Vincе should have ignited a crossover feeding frenzy and birthed a franchise but the odds at retail were stacked against him. It's never too late MGS. The sequel Beep could deliver on 360... We'll even throw in.

Conker Live and Reloaded

Do its visuals rival most 360 games? Affirmative. Is it a big, bright, Rare platforming epic? Of course. Did it contain some of the best Live gaming on the Box? Yes! Is it also gaming's only naughty epic? Oh yeah—it houses massive, opera-singing poop! So where were the activist nut-jobs to make it a hit? They should have named it Passion of the Squirrel.

Blinx and Blinx 2

Naoto Oshima pretty much redefined action games with the first Blinx—a true treasure that somehow missed the mark. So he created a new, bigger, simpler universe and gave users comprehensive design tools. Strike two. Blinx never caught on but that doesn't make these two games any less amazing.

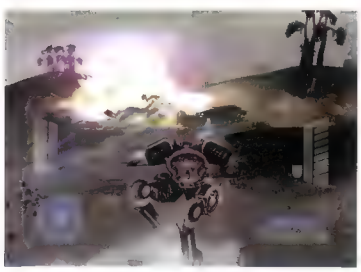
Action

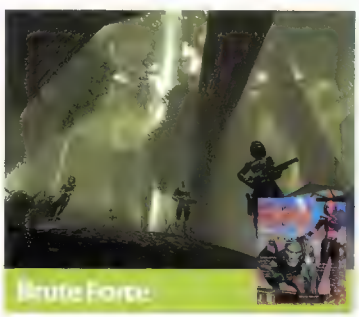
Otogi

FROM's Otogi was an acquired taste (like most of their games) but graphically nearly incomprehensible. Truly before its time. The sequel was less exciting but visually on par.

MechAssault and MechAssault Lone Wolf

The art of destroying things and each other got a whole lot better with MechAssault and especially the sequel which let us climb out of and into assorted mechs for the carnage ahead.





Brute Force

Many would disagree but I still think Brute Force was a killer game. Switch-on-the-fly team warfare was pretty new at the time and Brute Force offered up some cool characters and great scenarios.

Sports

DnA Xtreme Beach Volleyball

This is where my Xbox sports experience begins and ends. This series contains all the sports gaming I require. They didn't close the Xbox sports game studio for nothing. To be fair, I don't do the team sports thing unless it features a fat little plumber.

Racers

PGR

A finely-tuned racing instrument, Bizarre Creations' Project Gotham Racing delivers the type of street racing that legends are made of.

RalliSport Challenge and RalliSport Challenge II

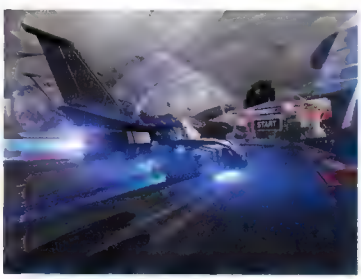
Rally games ran rampant on Xbox but RS I and II stand far above the rest. Online multiplayer, custom soundtracks, and 40 car classes combined with stellar graphics and buttery control.

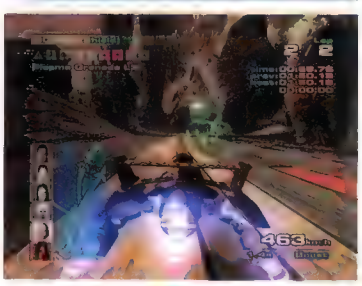
Forza Motorsport

Microsoft's answer to Sony's Gran Turismo, did just that, and if you ask any Xbox fan; more. One of the finest racing games ever made.

Quantum Redshift

What was to be the Xbox's WipEout didn't resonate with enough technophiles to stay airborne, but remains my favorite racing game on the system.





Apex Racing

The sleeper hit of Xbox racing, Apex let us design our own prototype cars and then race 'em against the world's finest, and the graphics rival any racing game pre-next-gen.

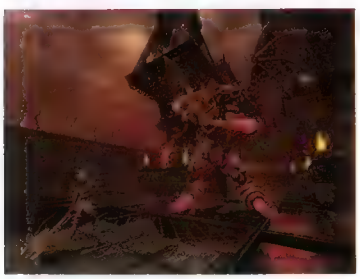
Sleepers

Grabbed by the Ghoulies

I'm still scratching my head over this one. A pure analog action game with genius AI, bursting with originality and some of the most amazing cartoon visuals, by Rare. And people complained!? Where have all the gamers gone?

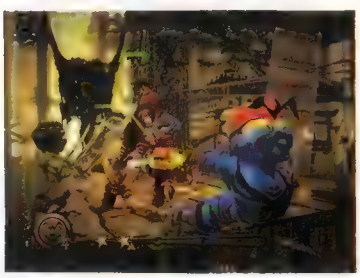
Enclave

Yes, it was rock-hard and desperately needed checkpoint saves but Enclave housed Rammstein cover-worthy character designs, blistering graphics, and mean gameplay.



Kung Fu Chaos

Ninja Theory's kung-fu action cinema chop-suey was the ultimate melding of action and combat and stands as one of the most beautiful SD style games ever built. Too bad America didn't get it. For their next trick...Heavenly Sword.



Phantom Dust

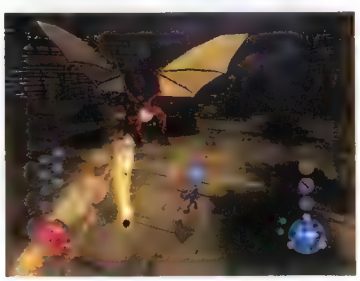
Panzer Dragoon Saga creator Yukio Futatsugi designs a sci-fi fighting opus (200 levels long) with the best character designs the genre has ever seen, an unforgettable score, and completely unique gameplay, and...crickets. Was it the Majesco curse?

Blood Wake

The boating action game didn't break sales records but was loads of fun and way unique.

Nightshade

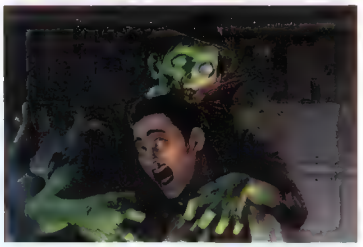
One of the most addictive top-down/3D action games since 16-bit, awash with blazing magic and fantastic ambience.



The Jam & Earl

Visual Concepts couldn't have made a better sequel and the Sega faithful sat on their hands. Are we not funky? Do we not like presents? Pft.

Stubbs the Zombie

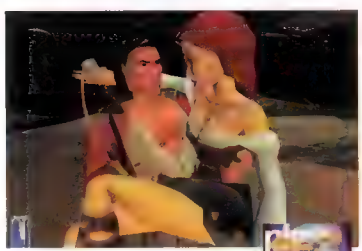


Stubbs, riding on the Halo Engine, was late to the party but stands as vindication for all those zombies we've so mindlessly mutilated over the years. They came, they ate brains, and they farted.

Missed opportunities

Gaiaron

Toby Gard's first and only solo effort post Tomb Raider had all of the adventure you could ask for housed in a visual style with which few found fancy.

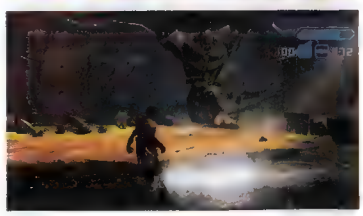


Sudeki

It had its share of warts but I'll always remember it for its grandeur, vision, soundtrack, engaging characters and magic moments.

Advent Rising

Within the framework of what could have been one of the greatest space operas gaming has ever seen, we found a game with a burning soul but failed execution.



A not so rocky start

Aside from a pile of sports, the Xbox launch had some thrust.

Halo

Who knew? The most caught off guard the gaming populace has ever been.

Dead or Alive 3

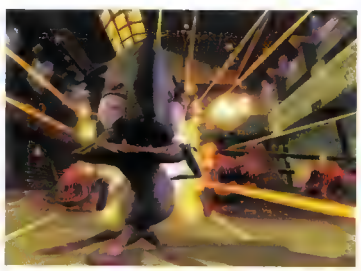
The law states that you must launch with a powerful fighter and it doesn't get much more powerful than Team Ninja's DoA (see Japan 360 launch).

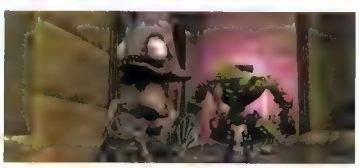
Mad Dash

Crystal Dynamics' launch title featured vs., critters, and platform/racing. I liked it.

Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee

About all I cared about post Halo. Another gift from Oddworld. Come back Lorne!





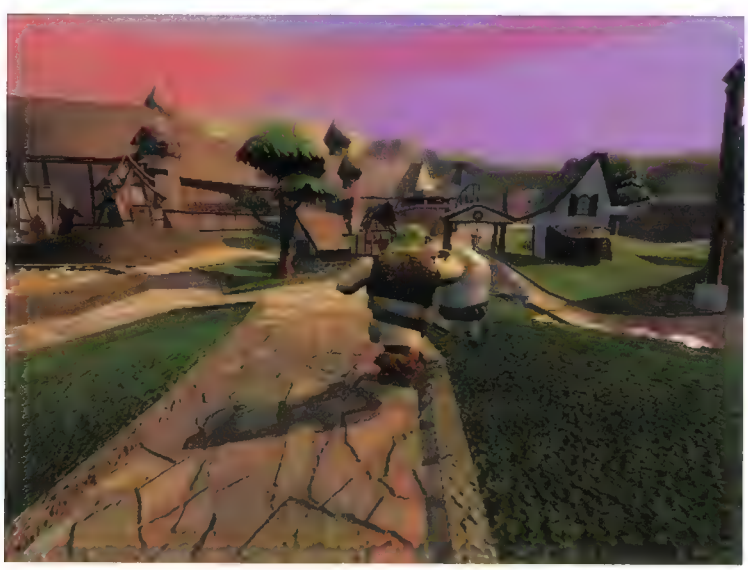
Amped

No "1080" but a pretty decent snowboarding game.

Launch Oddity: Weird Science

Shrek

The poster child for bump-mapping (it remains the one and only wall-to-wall bump-mapped Xbox game) was also the poster child for shite control that made you want to bludgeon yourself with the then massive Xbox controller.



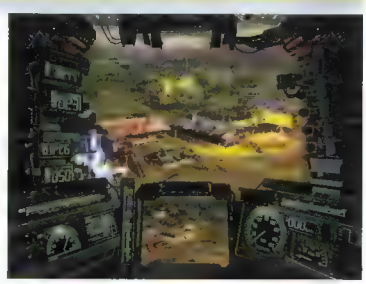
Fighting faux pas...

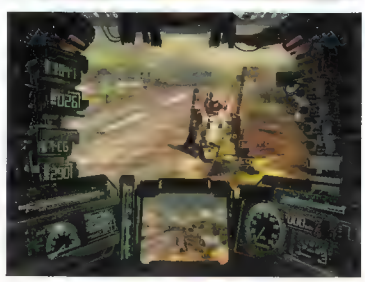
Try as they might, Microsoft Game Studios attempted to enter the waning fighting game wars with the beautiful but flawed Kakuto Chojin, followed by what was to be the pinnacle of fighting games—Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus. MK Co-creator John Tobias formed Studio Gigante and set out to create a fighter so advanced and interactive...that it was just too damn advanced and interactive. Look at it though! All I wanted for Xbox was Killer Instinct. Boo Rare...Boo!

The next ROB the robot

Steel Battalion: Line of Contact

Expensive, hard to find but highly collectible you could only play it on Xbox. SB will certainly go down as one of the most collectible game/controller combos ever offered.





The one that got away...

B.C.

Once they polished off Fable, Lionhead Studios was set to apply the finishing touches on B.C., but the game proved so ambitious that the money to hone it into a comprehensive and fun game ultimately was its undoing. I'd give anything for an old E3 ROM...

Xbox 360: So far, so great

As successful as the Xbox has been, especially given it was Microsoft's first console, the Xbox 360 is poised to ratchet them ever closer to Sony. With games like Halo 3, Fable 2, Gears of War, Blue Dragon, and Mass Effect in the offing along with a growing army on Live, Microsoft Game Studios has everything going their way. Six or seven years from now when I'm looking back at the 360's best, I hope the games on the preceding pages are backwards compatible with the 720. **play**

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sonic Team	Available	Fall 2006

Phantasy Star Universe

Universal appeal...

words **Eric Patterson**

Back in 2001, if you had a Dreamcast and an internet connection, it's quite likely that the release of Sega's utterly addicting Phantasy Star Online caused your social life to nosedive into a burning wreck. Five years later, we stand on the eve of the release of Phantasy Star Universe, a game that promises to bring back everything we loved about PSO, while also presenting us with enough new options, worlds to explore, and so much more that you might as well kiss the outside world goodbye. We had the chance to pose some questions to Takao Miyoshi, the producer of PSU, in the hopes of not only covering some of the basics behind the rebirth of Sega's beloved online series, but also to answer a few of the burning questions that still go unanswered.

Interview

Mr. Takao Miyoshi // PSU Producer

play: First of all, I'd just like to say that I spent way too many days of my life staying up far too late playing Phantasy Star Online with friends over the internet. Should people like me expect to become addicted again when Phantasy Star Universe comes out?

Thank you for playing PSO and for your love of the franchise. We are really excited for the launch of Phantasy Star Universe because we know the game will not only live up to the expectations of fans of the Phantasy Star franchise, but it will also be a thrilling experience for those who are new to the sci-fi action RPG genre, or even to online gaming in general.

For PSU, the game is going to include both an expanded online mode, and a full single-player offline storyline. How was it decided to include both in the same game, instead of concentrating on one or the other? Did the game start out as a new online version, and then the single player aspect was brought in? Or was the plan always to make a game that would be strong in both aspects?

Our fans are key to the success of the Phantasy Star Franchise, so it is only natural for us to hear what they have to say. They love the action and missions in the online component, but wanted more from the universe of Phantasy Star that could tell the story of the characters and planets. And that made sense. So we planned, early on in development, to enrich both

"I believe PSU turned out to be a game that truly offers the best of both worlds..."

~**Takao Miyoshi** PSU Producer

the single-player story and online modes. The plan was to lead gamers through an intense and epic storyline in the single-player mission and introduce gamers to the characters and politics of Phantasy Star Universe. From there, the story continues in the online multiplayer mode, leaving the gamer with even more adventures in the Phantasy Star universe to explore with friends. The goal was to create a familiar environment for an audience who is uncomfortable with online games, to comfortably explore online gaming.

I loved PSO, and actually preferred getting an online Phantasy Star title instead of a new single-player RPG. However, some fans were very upset that it was an online game instead of a "true" Phantasy Star sequel (like our editor-in-chief for instance). Do you think those fans will be pleased with the single-player portion of PSU?
PSU exists exactly to satisfy both types of fans. If you adventure into the single-player mode, there are volumes of chapters that would undoubtedly appeal to those who loved the previous Phantasy Star series; they would be immersed in the world even more. Moreover, if you visit the online mode, the same world you have been playing in PSO has been wholly expanded with a brand new race, customizable rooms, a new variation of droids (previously known as MAGs), randomly generated missions, a larger and more expansive hub, and plenty more new customizable features. The player can truly become one of the characters in that world!

For the single-player portion of the game, what were the most important aspects that you wanted to see implemented in the game? Did using the same basic engine for the offline mode that the online mode uses ever hamper what you wanted to do with the single-player portion of the game?
In the single-player portion of the game we were concerned with staying true to the universe of Phantasy Star. In order to do this, a large part of our focus was to create a compelling and involved story that would cover universal themes such as worldviews and politics, as well as character-focused stories to which the gamer would relate to and empathize with. We also wanted to ensure that both single-player mode and online mode had the same intuitive controls to sort through items and execute combat moves in real-time.

And, on the flip side, what were your goals with the online portion of the game? Was the plan to take what had been created with PSO and make it better, or to start fresh and work from there?
We aimed to make PSU more powerful and compelling while maintaining the good points in PSO. The City (Lobby) can now not only allow many more users to communicate with each other, but the range of communication has been further expanded.

From a technical aspect, will the single-player game be similar to the online mode in what a player can and will do? For example, will techniques be learned the same way, can Grinders be used on weapons, will leveling up be the same, and so on?
Basically, what you can do is the same in both, but the presence of the other players greatly affects the gameplay in the online mode. In the single-player mode, the main character, Ethan, has more well-rounded attributes and abilities (speed, ability to level-up, limitation in occupation types, etc.) compared to those attributes and abilities in the normal online gameplay. In that sense, the single-player and online modes share the same systems, but have different customizability and functionality.

Phantasy Deep-Space 9.

One of the big updates to PSU over PSO is the changes made to classes. However, it now sounds like non-Force characters cannot use any techniques at all, even low-level ones. Is that true? I think the Force class needed to be strengthened when it came to techniques, but as somebody who played a Hunter whose role was being the healer for my party, I'll be crushed if I can't use any tech-

~Takao Miyoshi

niques at all.
We wanted to push the teamwork factor in the multiplayer mode, where players can work together in six-player squads by offering different skill-sets to the team to offset any deficiencies. Players will be able to select an Expert Type once they satisfy certain conditions through increasing Type Levels as they play the online mode. There are combined class types available in the Expert Type such as being both Hunter and Force classes.

How does PSU fit into the Phantasy Star timeline? I've heard some speculation that it is a prequel to PSO - is that true?
PSU is an original story that is separate from previous Phantasy Star stories. We hope that you will enjoy this new story as it takes place in the universe of Phantasy Star and is driven by complex relationships, adventure and exploration, and self-discovery.

I've seen that your recommendation to fans is to play the offline single-player side of PSU first, and then go online. However, one of the fun parts about PSO was finally getting to an area for the first time, and exploring it with your friends. If I've played the single-player mode first, will all of the areas of the online mode be familiar to me, or will there be new and different areas that I can experience for the first time? How many different areas in total will the online portion of the game have?
The experience in the single-player mode compared to that in the online mode are very different. In the online mode, there is a City where players can interact with one another and purchase items, fields where teams can play the game, and lobbies where you can invite others to go on quests and visit your personal space. All of these areas will be different or contain different maps from the single-player mission, and gamers will encounter monsters that are only available online. In addition, players will always have a fresh experience in the online mode when playing with different squads because the missions will continuously change in this constantly expanding world.
I still recommend playing the single-player mode first so that gamers will understand the gameplay flow and the story of PSU. In addition, the excitement you get would be different when you play the game knowing the background of the characters/races, and the scheme of the world.

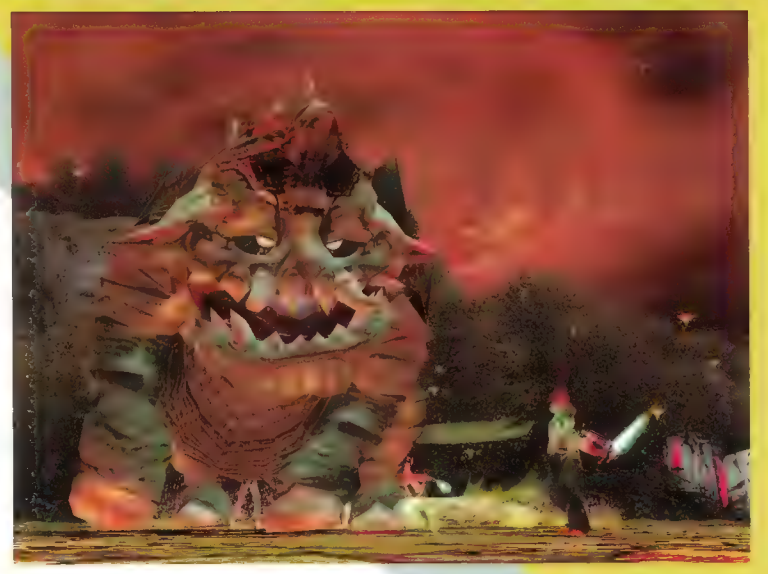
When the first information about PSU came out, many fans were excited because they thought that the game might take place in the Algol System due to there being three planets. Was PSU's Gurhal System inspired at all by the Algol System from the original series? And, since we're getting grasslands and deserts, and chance for any snow-covered areas in honor of Delozis?
Gurhal System and Algol Star System are different from each other, but some names were inspired by those featured in the Phantasy Star series, and adhere to the basic tradition of the franchise. However, the natural environment of a planet and its cultures are unique in PSU. Therefore, certain elements in PSUare similar to the original franchise, and other elements are new in PSU.
Additionally, there is no snow-covered area, but you will have "Ice Contamination" as one of Contaminations by the SEED, a mysterious life form that is introduced in the single-player adventure.

> "Our fans are key to the success of the Phantasy Star Franchise..."
>
> --Takao Miyoshi

Will we see some familiar Phantasy Star monsters, items, and so on return in PSU, like we saw in PSO?
There's a good possibility that the ones highly expected by fans will return.

One more bit of classic Phantasy Star nostalgia - the original game was very unique in that one of the party members was a Musk Cat, a small, long-eared, yellow cat. Have you ever considered that as a possible playable race for a future version? It'd certainly be interesting.
That is a very interesting idea for a species. We have a new playable race called Beasts that are physically strong and able to handle certain heavier melee weapons much better than other races.

PSU is going to include a wide variety of user-controllable vehicles, much like the original Phantasy Star. In the single-player game, will they be available for use at any time, or only in key locations? Will they be usable at all online?
The vehicles will appear in certain areas in the single-player mission and will also be available online.



Is there a chance Sega would ever reconsider their decision to separate the U.S. and Japanese servers? As somebody who had a lot of Japanese friends in PSO, it's a bit disappointing no longer be able to play online with them.
We decided not to link the US and Japanese servers because the launch times of the title are different. PSU emphasizes the story progression, so we have no plan to connect both countries' servers as of now.

There has been some talk that the PC version will require an internet connection even when playing the single-player mode, due to security reasons. Is this true, and will the PS2 and Xbox 360 versions also require this?
For the PC version, the environment is required to have constant access to the Internet. This is, we believe, necessary to eliminate wrongful acts by users. You do not have to have access to the network when playing the single-player mode in the PS2 version. As to the Xbox 360 version, it is not yet determined.

I'm assuming that characters will be stored on Sega's servers, much like the later versions of PSO. Will this mean that I could, for example, start off on the PS2 version, and then later switch over to one of the other versions?
The PS2 and PC versions have user accounts in common so of course, it is possible to play the PC version after playing the PS2 version, and vice versa. Concerning the Xbox 360 version, we're still finalizing the details.

Finally, do you have a message for all of the Phantasy Star fans out there?
I believe PSU turned out to be a game that truly offers the best of both worlds – an epic single-player adventure for those who want the deep storyline and character development of an RPG, and a vast online component for those who want to be able to team up with other characters for more open-ended squad play. I would love you to play it, and hope that many users will spend every day online having fun. **play**

Reviews

August 2006

Ninety Nine Nights
Disgaea 2
LOTR Battle for Middle Earth II
Chromehounds
Brave: Search for Spirit Dancer
Over G Fighters
FlatOut 2

Big Brain Academy
Pirates of the Carribean
Lemmings PSP
Micro Machines 4
Pac-Man World Rally

Staff Round-up

Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, top-dow action, action-RPGs, 2D action
Now playing: Ninety Nine Nights, Brave Enchanted Arms, Ultimate Ghosts n Goblins, Yakuza, JSRF
Top 2 Xbox-only all time: Fable, Jet Set Radio Future

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood, E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Table tennis, Chromehounds
Top 2 Xbox-only all time: Star Wars KOTOR, Fable

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump-mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins
p14

Arthur the Knight makes his long overdue and extremely triumphant return in a game that not only lives up to the namesake, but eclipses it.

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, humming-bird simulators
Now playing: Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth
Top 2 Xbox-only all time: Halo, Ninja

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Mike Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Our rating system

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game is the best, a modern classic.

10 Perfect
9 Extraordinary
8 Great
7 Good
6 Decent
5 Average
4 Below average
3 Poor
2 Bad
1 Terrible

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft Game Studios	Available	Aug. 16
Developer	Phantagram/Q Ent.	Online/Multi	Xbox Live Aware	ESRB Rating	M

N3

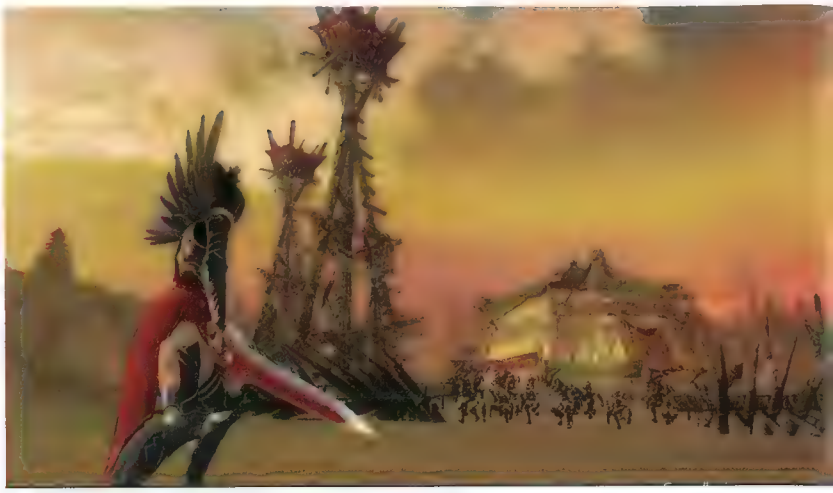
(Ninety-Nine Nights)

We can be heroes

Dave Halverson

For Ninety-Nine Nights (N3), Phantagram "joined forces" with Q Entertainment, which is kind of like an episode of "if they mated" splicing Ozzy Osborne with Deee-Lite. Q's Tetsuya Miziguchi created Space Channel 5 and Rez for Sega before leaving to establish Q, where he's created Lumines and Meteos. Phantagram, on the other hand, has become known for hardcore medieval fantasy-action and strategy with an emphasis on massive horde skirmishes and driving heavy-metal with their Kingdom Under Fire franchise, their first to resonate in the West. An odd pairing for sure, let alone the fact that Microsoft gave them 14 months to complete this project. Kingdom Under Fire took 3 years. Q was responsible for N3's storyline, game and world concept while Phantagram took on game and level design and programming duties: The end result is neither a KUF clone or overly tame. Somehow the two have managed to bond their specialties without compromising the integrity of what N3 had to be—epic.

In terms of gameplay, N3 is very much a streamlined version of KUF—replacing complex deployment with faster, more simplified action along with the ability to equip magic and abilities on the battlefield. In KUF you needed to carefully deploy several troops and shift them about on the battleground throughout each skirmish, where in N3 the commands are far less complex. Using the shoulder buttons on the 360 pad, your leader barks out a simplified strategy: "wait here", "wait for orders", "prepare for battle!". Simple, but more integral than meets the eye—as are the troops you choose to fight at your side; choosing between infantry, archers, pikemen, and the like. The heart of the game, though, is as it should be: focused on the main character. You're given a series of missions to carry out, forged specifically for the character you're playing, that are essentially mid to long journeys pushing through legions of enemies to get to the proverbial head on a stick, dotted with mid to heavy battle sequences which you must survive until reaching whomever or whatever is marked for death in league with the story you're embarking on. These battles may appear as a series of button-mashing onslaughts, but this will only lead you to an eventual death. The key to winning battles in N3 lies in three things: deployment, technique, and the Orb gauges. Filling the red gauge by mowing through lesser swarms and amassing red souls triggers the lesser Orb attack which, depending on the size of the skirmish, sends you plowing though troops like a weed-whacker with a jet-engine, releasing blue souls, filling the larger blue Orb gauge. Herein lies the game's secret. The inclination is to unleash your fury whenever the red gauge fills, however, doing so with less than a hundred or so attackers on screen warrants few blue souls, leaving you vulnerable to the next attack. It's better to lead chasing minions into one large skirmish (they will take chase when you run through them—the enemies in N3 are much more intuitive than in KUF) in order to maximize your most powerful attack, leaving enough alive to refill the red Orb gauge. Reach a mid-boss surrounded by a thousand



Inphyy swings some seriously heavy metal.

"Nothing in this genre has ever come close to what N3 delivers visually."

A rare moment of quite falls o'er the land...

"These battles may appear as a series of button-mashing onslaughts, but this will only lead you to an eventual death."

soldiers without the proper Orb energy and you may as well restart the battle. This means, of course, some do-overs, which in this case are purely a blessing: Seldom have I derived so much pleasure by memorizing enemy attack patterns and terrain. Much of your success or failure also relies on technique. N3 is (I suppose, technically) a "button-masher" yes, but an intelligent one at that. Mow into a sea of lesser goblins with simple sword strikes and you will be killed. Using air combos and or ground to air combos is requisite to amass souls and conserve energy. You must fight smart from outside, leading into and through each mob. Sometimes, when smaller forces are closing in, it's better to leave your troops behind and wipe them out alone to amass all of the their spirit energy and conserve your troops' health, although, inevitably you will almost always lose them to some massive beast, save for your second- and depending on the scenario, third-in-command, by level's end. Inphyy's last two battles are brutal (equip the Phoenix Sword), but Myifee or Aspharr await. Choose Myifee, especially if you played KUF. His quest begins in a village and segues to a kingdom. It's everything you ever wanted to see in KUF that the Xbox couldn't handle and as a character he's as fierce and arrogant a barbarian as you could ever hope for.

Now consider that this looks utterly stunning. Metal glistens, character and beast models are incredibly refined given their numbers, environments are lush and the effects are simply indescribable. Nothing in this genre has ever come close to what N3 delivers visually.

Add an epic Hollywood score (more Vangelis than Judas Priest thanks to, I suppose, Q) and well, you have a beast of a war on your hands.

N3 isn't as highly produced as KUF (its pace warrants less in-game banter) but the story—which is dubbed well but out of synch due to the original Japanese lip movement—is much better and played out in stunning fashion, sewn seamlessly into the game via cut-scenes. There's also a deeper meaning at work here, binding the entire tale together. Endings are, or seem to be, vague for a reason as you beat scenarios leading up to the true meaning of the namesake. Many points of view, all hinged on the tragedy of war are represented.

Each main character brings his or her own story, style, generals, weaponry, magic and scenery to N3 and each ramp up individually rather than the game ramping up difficulty progressively; a wise choice. People will call N3 a "hack 'n slash" and on some level I suppose it is, however, those people probably didn't come for what this game offers. This isn't medieval Rainbow Six. If you've come for heavy tactics and deployment you will be disappointed. But if you come for epic battles, inspired visuals, soaring overtures, and gorgeous medieval design you will be overcome with joy. **play**

N3 (Ninety-Nine Nights) score 9.0

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	NIS America
Developer	Nippon Ichi	Online/Multi	NA
Available	August		
ESRB Rating	Teen		

Disgaea 2 Cursed Memories

Once upon a strategy game...

words **Eric L. Patterson**

If I were to ask you to come up with a new strategy RPG that would sell like gangbusters, would you think to include things like cute demons, angel assassins, and exploding penguins? Japanese developer Nippon Ichi thought they were fine ideas for a new game, and 2003's surprise hit Disgaea was born. What cemented Disgaea as a cult classic was that it had been crafted in such a way that both hardcore strategy lovers as well as more casual gamers could enjoy and appreciate it, each for their own reasons. Three years and many a blown-up Prinny later, N1 looks to recapture that success with the long awaited follow-up, Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories.

The tale to tell this time around is that of Adell, a young hero struggling to lift the curse on his village, and his reluctant traveling companion Rozalin, daughter of the demon king responsible for said curse. Though slightly more serious than the first Disgaea, D2's story is still brimming with humor and charm, not to mention a wacky cast of characters that gel together oh so well. It's also, I must say, a nice change of pace from the usual strategy game tradition of trying to keep track of who's who and what exactly happened in the countless tomes worth of in-game events.

The storyline is then supported by some of the most enjoyable gameplay I've ever experienced from an SRPG. Disgaea 2 provides an almost ridiculous amount of options for those who want to roll up their sleeves, get elbow-deep in building up their characters, weapons, or abilities, and then test the results against the game's various creature-filled missions. Trademark gameplay features return, such as the Dark Assembly (a unique way of unlocking new options), Item World (fight through random dungeons inside of items to increase their stats), and Geopanels (various colored squares on battle maps that cause different effects), all improved and expanded upon from their previous incarnations. New to the party is a convictions system, where you can strengthen your reputation in the demon world by being convicted of committing various "crimes." These aspects of the game are so easy to get the hang of, yet so addicting, that even players who might not otherwise enjoy such things will find themselves losing countless hours

"What cemented Disgaea as a cult classic was that it had been crafted in such a way that both hardcore strategy lovers as well as more casual gamers could enjoy and appreciate it..."

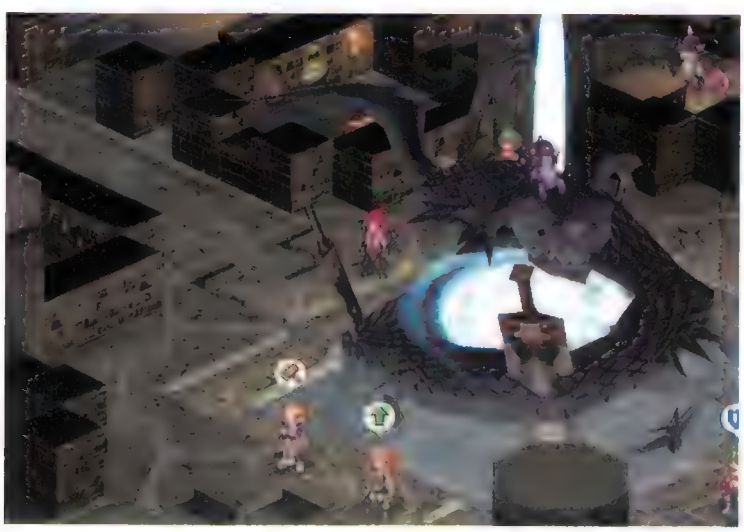
doing so.

Unfortunately, Disgaea 2's most evil overlord isn't any of the in-game bosses, but a living, breathing entity: the crafty Baron Von Viewpoint. Throughout the game, you'll be happily enjoying yourself and your gaming experience, and the Baron will come crashing in to irritate you like a red-hot poker to the groin. Sometimes he'll make you pound on the camera button, hoping desperately for an angle–that never comes, of course–that lets you see your party without them being obstructed by the scenery. Other times, he'll cackle with delight as characters and monsters crowd together, resulting in a headache-inducing mess with no easy way to separate out who is who, or as your realize that you can't bring up an enemy movement radius and then reposition the camera to actually see where all it covers. These problems aren't frequent enough to break the game, but when they show up, man are they annoying.

Barring my unhealthy loathing of the camera, and a bit of oddity in the game's A.I.–monsters rush to attack any treasure chests that show up as if their lives depended on it–I have nothing but love for Disgaea 2. Fans of the original will need little convincing, but for the rest of you, trust me when I say this game's well worth your time. **play**

Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories **score 9.0**

+	Surreal situations such as little girls with big ass swords beating up peglegged penguins
-	A times dealing with the camera is as enjoyable as drinking bleach.



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Electronic Arts	Available	Now
Developer	Electronic Arts	Online/Multi	1-2	ESRB Rating	Teen

The Lord of the Rings II
The Battle for Middle-earth

Your Majesty ...

words **Greg Orlando**

The mining of the lucrative The Lord of the Rings franchise continues unabated with the Xbox 360's The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II. Electronic Arts has tapped into a rich vein here, and Middle-earth II, to the developer's credit, rings like silver and shines like gold.

Middle-earth II first saw release on PC. The real-time strategy underwent a dramatic transformation for its console debut, with Electronic Arts reworking the control scheme to make it suitable for console play. The developers succeeded with their plans, and the control scheme, though a bit Byzantine, works well.

It's impossible to divorce Middle-earth II from its controls, and the developer's success in allowing players to select their forces, move them around the battlefields, manipulate the camera, and successfully manage the game's structures in order to build an army is a crucial victory. The controls are complex enough to allow players to select individual units, all units on the game screen, and entire armies, but simple enough that novice players won't need to memorize the combinations of trigger pulls and button presses in order to successfully wield their armies.

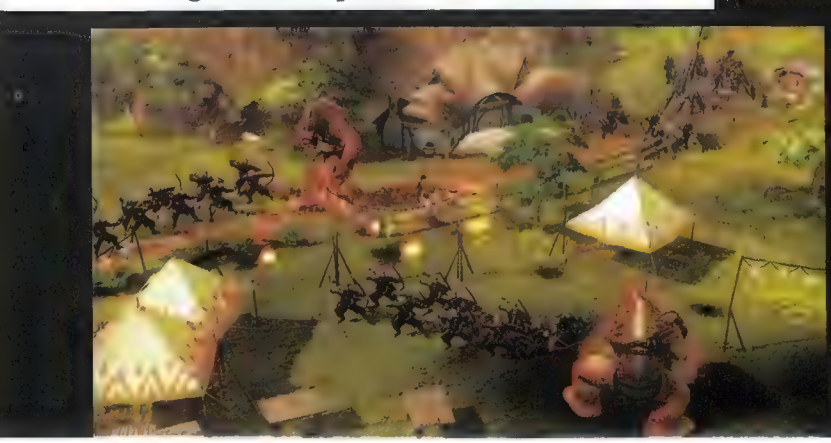
It was definitely a risk to jam a wealth of commands onto the Xbox 360 controller, but in doing so Electronic Arts weighs in on the side of not dumbing things down. This, too, is another victory, allowing players to send their forces on patrol routes, quickly jump to battles, and establish specific pathways for armies to follow. In short, the game allows players to do with their armies as they will. And with the tools firmly in place, players can enjoy what is a solid real-time strategy.

The game offers two single-player campaigns and six different warring factions, each with its own special units and hero characters. Players can command forces on land, sea, and in the air, and Middle-earth II doesn't skimp in allowing lots of forces on the screen at one time. Battles are majestic affairs; huge rock trolls hurl boulders from long range, eagles swoop down on their targets, and merry old Tom Bombadil skips into battle before bowling over his foes with sweeping attacks. Sadly, however, the scope and magnitude of the battles comes with a price. The game does not allow players to zoom too closely in on the fights, muting the immediacy and softening the impact of hundreds of soldiers tearing the hell out of one another at one time

Other small flaws exist, but can easily be dismissed. There are some brief camera stutters when players attempt to sweep the game's cursor (which is linked to the camera) from one end of the terrain to another. Two separate tutorials exist for players, but are marred by bad voicework and are far too vague in giving direction to be of much use. Only the in-game mini-map serves as Middle-earth II's other noticeable drawback; it's far too small to be of any value, yet it takes up valuable real estate and can neither be expanded nor done away with.

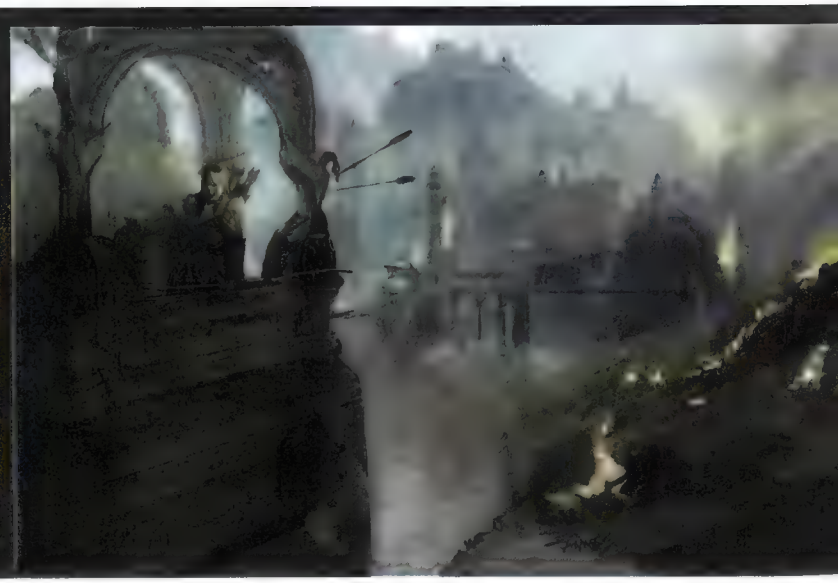
Five Xbox 360 Live modes flesh out Middle-earth II, three more than can be found in the PC version of the game. Modes such as king of the hill and capture and hold actively encourage massive battles, and the cheers of victory or anguished screams of defeat echoing from Xbox Live communicator headsets serve as a most excellent reward for a job bloodily well done. **play**

The Lord of the Rings II: The Battle for Middle-earth **score 8.5**



"The developers succeeded with their plans, and the control scheme, though a bit Byzantine, works well..."

The rock trolls are a devastating force.



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Sega	Available	Now
Developer	From Software	Online/Multi	20-man squads; 2-12 players	ESRB Rating	Teen

Chromehounds

Release the hounds!

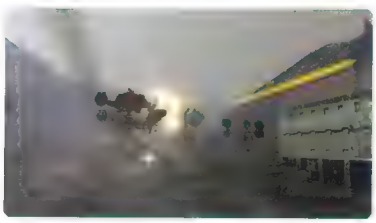
words Greg Orlando

Man's dystopian future, fraught with unceasing warfare between rival nations possessing huge, ass-kicking mechanized behemoths cannot possibly get here soon enough. Hydrogen cars, solar power, peace, love, and 100 percent post-consumer recycled materials be damned: What the world needs now is stuff to blow up and giant mechs to do it with. Enter Chromehounds.

Chromehounds offers first- and third-person mech combat in both off- and online varieties. This type of game is developer From Software's stock-in-trade; the company has made quite a reputation with its Armored Core series for the PlayStation and PlayStation 2. With Chromehounds, From has hit perhaps its highest note in terms of giant mechs, producing a game that's both highly customizable and playable.

Six different Chromehound types are available: soldier, sniper, defender, scout, heavy gunner, and commander. Each fulfils a specific role, but players can blur the lines between the classes in the game's garage. Parts and weapons can be swapped out to the player's liking, creating such potent combinations as a speedy scout with the ability to easily climb steep hills and then use long-range weapons to snipe enemy foes in relative safety or soldiers with four legs to enable them to quickly dodge incoming projectiles. As per the drill, From allows players access to thousands of different combinations in terms of legs, chases, weapons, cockpits, etc. It is entirely possible to go overboard here.

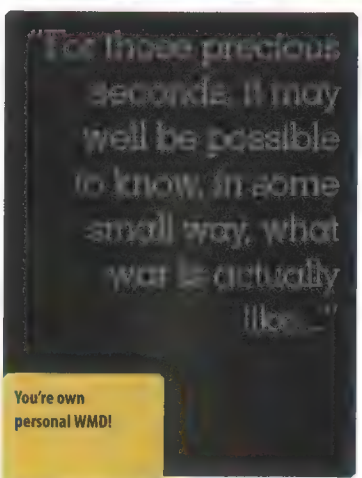
The customization adds an additional layer of strategy to Chromehounds, one

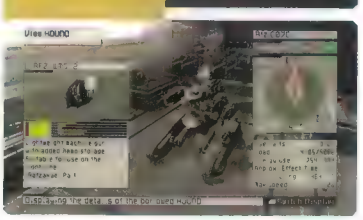


that's very much welcome. Choices in Chromehounds have consequences, and a mech that looks good in the garage may well be a dud in the field. Players have to weigh factors such as encumbrance, armor, weapon recharge speeds, physical space restrictions, and terrain mobility when creating their Hound.

Although the game's environments tend to be dull and oftentimes washed out, stuff blows up excellently in Chromehounds. Dirt, smoke, dust, and fire effects are amazing here, and not wholly because they are crisply and realistically displayed. In combat, players will have their views obscured by the destruction they wreak; the deadly time between the vision-blurring dust/smoke/fire that makes it impossible to see anything and a clean line-of-sight is one of gaming's most tense and dramatic moments. For those precious seconds, it may well be possible to know, in some small way, what war is actually like.

From takes things a bit too far in terms of the game's menu-heavy presentation. At times, players will find themselves looking at a map that takes up maybe half of the screen—while other readouts take up another 15-20 percent. Playing on a quarter of the screen isn't at all fun, yet Chromehounds seems to take this as a matter of course. Worse still, the game that features thousands of different parts for its mechs makes little to no allowance for players to customize the endless spray of gauges and meters on its play screen.





The game shines online, with players encouraged to work in concert with another by capturing radio towers enabling them to talk via Xbox Live communicators. Teamwork is all-important here, and use of the towers by From as a means to facilitate this was a very smart move indeed. The game also encourages players to form lasting bonds by giving them a persistent war to fight, with up to 20 players coming together to form a squad and up to six of them competing at one time. And so, it is very nice indeed to let these dogs out—with all apologies to the Baha Men. **play**

Chromehounds

score **7.0**

\+ Great environmental effects, massive wealth of customization options.

\- Gameplay menu heavy, environments often dull and gray.

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Southpeak Interactive	Available	August
Developer	VIS Entertainment Inc.	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E 10+

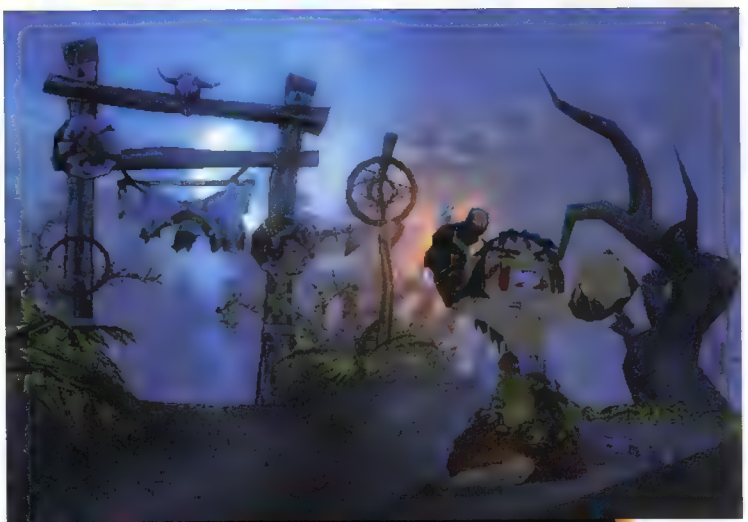
Brave
The Search for Spirit Dancer

The PS2's last great platformer?

words Dave Halverson

As I cling tightly to the past while simultaneously embracing what promises to be a blindingly bright future, Brave isn't making things any easier. Letting go of the era where my beloved action-platformers ruled the day with a furry, three-fingered, but otherwise iron fist has been rough. Psychonauts, Blinx, Voodoo Vince, Tork, Legend of Kay, Kameo...None of these games registered on the retail scale the way they would have in the nineties, and with Sly on sabbatical and Rare tilling a new type of farm, the outlook for boppity 3D epics seems murky. Aside from the odd movie- or cartoon-based platformer, along with a spattering of franchise players, the glory days of the platformer seem to be drawing to a close. Or at least they did until a lively little SD Brave with a sweet double-jump and the heart of a warrior dropped on my doorstep. ...They pull me back in!

It's anyone's guess where VIS Entertainment, best known for the original State of Emergency, got these platforming chops, but Brave is by far the



Trudgin' through the tundra.

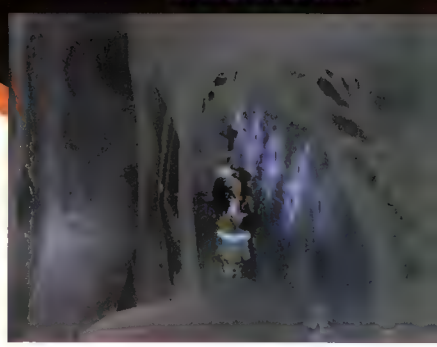
best game they've ever produced. Not only is it visually arresting and wonderfully designed—from the lay of the terrain to the wonderfully exaggerated character design—but it's also refreshingly unsullied, infusing Native American mysticism with a spirited platformer that never, ever stands still. From the beginning, Brave blossoms, opening up before you like a true trek should. There's little in the way of backtracking, overused environs, token puzzles, or cheap devices to elongate the journey; replaced by a chain of invigorating gameplay scenarios as Brave endeavors to thwart the deity that took his parents and enslaved his tribe, turning them into mindless zombies before possessing their great shaman to go after Brave as he set out to find Spirit Dancer, the only shaman capable of bringing down the beast. Aided by the spirit of his fallen master, Grey Bear, (the game's resident whatnot book, or guide) Brave must become one with nature to fulfill his destiny. This means making fire, fishing, archery, fighting, calling and possessing animals, swimming, ice-climbing, canoeing, using magic, flying a great eagle, riding rampaging buffalo and other such acts of daring and platforming, each of which VIS has honed into a skill unto itself. Ice-climbing is button-driven, enemies and indigenous beasts react in cadence with the game, and canoeing feels like you really are (the white water bits of gameplay are outstanding). The same goes for the platforming, conjuring patterns late in the game that made me yearn for the days when games derived value from fun, difficulty and design over length. Now of course, we all want both—a tall order for most developers. The voice work—especially that of Brave—is also exemplary and the pace and pervasive diversity create an adventure that's impossible to put down.

What Brave lacks in length it makes up for in execution. Elements such as gathering stones to ignite fire, uprooting shrubs, beast possession or learning new tactics are quickly integrated and assimilated. The game gets right to it every step of the way. Brave seems to always be forging ahead, and in the event that he needs to occupy an area for more than a few minutes, you find yourself relishing the opportunity while also eager to get things done and move on.

The ironic thing is that the game's flow and lack of superfluity, which makes it so fun, may inevitably be its Achilles' heel. VIS could have easily used and reused the breadth of Brave's universe, but rather than stick us with a bunch of menial cranks and levers they chose to burn brighter, over longer, and hide a bunch of Totems along the way, inviting us back after the credits roll.

These are the games I love, and Brave really struck a chord with me. I'd love to see it blossom into a franchise or next-gen sequel but I'm a realist these days. I take what I can get, savor the moments and move on.

Brave transitions from the eagle to a stampeding herd only he has the power to stop.



"The ironic thing is that the game's flow and lack of superfluity, which makes it so fun, may inevitably be its Achilles' heel."

Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer

score 8.5

\+ Elements from Zelda to Pilotwings make their way into the tapestry of the game which, while outwardly cartoon shy, is also surprisingly spiritual

\- 5-7 hour long, although it does warrant replays

System(s)	PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, DS, PSP, PC, GBA	Publisher	LucasArts
Developer	TT Games	Available	September 2006

Lego Star Wars II
The Original Trilogy

Blockheads, use the Force

Greg Orlando

"The Lego theme is jackhammered throughout. Just about everything in the game can be blasted into tiny pieces..."

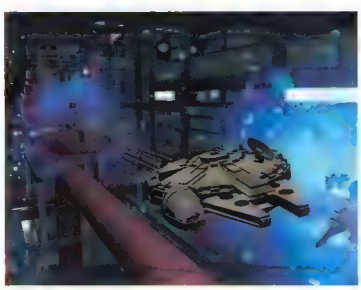
The concept may have been forged in a marketing meeting: combine George Lucas's beloved movie franchise with George Lucas's love of money to create the umpteenth variant on a Star Wars video game. Previous marketing meetings had given birth to 1997's Star Wars: Masters of Teras Kasi, someone's lame attempt to fuse Star Wars with a 3D fighting game. Another such meeting produced the vehicle-combat dud Star Wars: Demolition.

There is and was a lesson to be learned here, and that is no one should block the exits when the marketing men say they have a great idea for a game. LucasArts did not learn its lesson when it came time to develop Lego Star Wars: The Video Game, a quirky platforming adventure that featured blocky renditions of the characters from Lucas's Star Wars prequels in a charmingly breakaway world. And the only thing that can be said here is thank God no one at LucasArts thought to disregard this idea. Lego Star Wars was goofy fun, and a surprise hit that warranted a second outing.

With Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy, LucasArts and developer TT Games have turned their attention to Star Wars episodes four, five, and six: A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back, and the Return of the Jedi, respectively. The game's roster includes more than 100 different characters from the who's who (Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Chewbacca) to the "who's that?" Take that, Mr. Garindian spy.

Each film in Trilogy is broken down into six separate chapters, with each chapter containing its own blend of third-person shooting, platforming, puzzle-solving, and vehicular combat. All of the trilogy's major moments are captured here, either in playable form or via cut-scene: Han Solo blasting Greedo in the Mos Eisley cantina, the destruction of the first and second Death Stars, the battle of Hoth, and the stunning "I am your father" revelation in The Empire Strikes Back.

Lego of me!



The Lego theme is jackhammered throughout. Just about everything in the game can be blasted into tiny pieces, and the resultant studs that fly out can be collected and redeemed for all sorts of goodies. Blocks littering the environment can be built into shapes to form doorways, ramps for non-flying droids, and vehicles such as AT-STs that can then be piloted and used to destroy obstacles. And, in the game's most charming feature, individual components from the various Star Wars characters can be mixed and matched to create weird and wonderful playable characters such as Darth Solo or Princess Bith.

Goofy and charming, Trilogy should appeal to both adults and children. There's certainly fun to be had, say, in learning the ways of the Force as Luke Skywalker with a diminutive and blocky Yoda perched on his shoulder, or in dragging explosive balls with a tow cable in a slightly modified version of the snowspeeder battle on Hoth. There's enough meat here, too, to draw in the hardcore, as levels can be replayed with different characters with different abilities in order to gain entrance to previously barred areas.

And, if nothing else, it's absolutely hilarious to see a Lego-style Chewbacca yank the arms of his enemies with a comically audible pop. **play**

Over G Fighters

Get over it

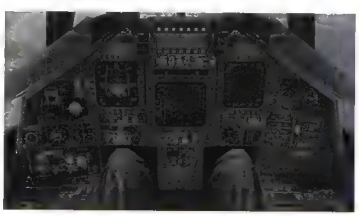
score 5.0

[redacted]	Xbox 360
[redacted]	Taito
[redacted]	Ubisoft
[redacted]	1-8
[redacted]	Now
[redacted]	T

The first- and third-person perspective Over G Fighters brings modern-day air warfare to the Xbox 360. It does not bring it to the 360 beautifully or gracefully, however. In no uncertain terms, Fighters is an ugly duckling.

It's odd the game chooses the first-person, in-cockpit mode as its default view, as this is its most unwieldy perspective. Here, players' views are obstructed by their plane's cockpit bubble itself, with the plane's green-text readouts (indicating altitude, speed, throttle power, etc.) serving as an additional distraction. This makes spotting targets harder than it need be, realism be damned. Thankfully, this view can be altered to something much more accommodating, either in the first- or third-person.

Fighters lets players can fly a host of American- and Soviet Union-made planes such as the F-14 Tomcat, the MiG-29, and the newly put into service F-22. It's also possible to choose a wingman, each with his or her own inclinations and combat specialty; basic commands can be issued to the wingman via the Xbox 360's back button. Players can also opt to change a plane's weaponry for a mission, or the amount of fuel it will carry. The end result is a smooth, yet uninspired, ride through the unfriendly skies. **Greg Orlando**



FlatOut 2

Crashtown, USA...

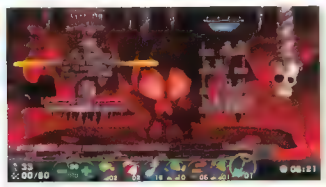
score 6.5

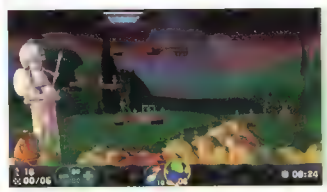
[redacted]	PC PlayStation 2 Xbox
[redacted]	Bugbear Entertainment
[redacted]	Vivendi Universal
[redacted]	1-8
[redacted]	Now
[redacted]	T

The original FlatOut showed the world that drivers getting hurled from their cars could, in fact, be fun. With FlatOut 2, the developers done all they can to expand the boundaries of hurling drivers from cars in video games, and the world is a much better place for it.

FlatOut 2, as a racing game, is competent, but marred by a poor sense of speed. Its smashmouth style summons up images of Electronic Arts' Burnout series, but without that series' emphasis on gloss and sheen. FlatOut 2's less burnished approach to racing has players driving multicolored wrecks on country roads, kicking up dust as they plow their way through the accumulated crap (rocks, logs, pieces of crushed divider) on the way to the finish line.

Demolition derbies and 12 fun minigames serve as FlatOut 2's calling card. It's exceedingly fun, and entirely cathartic, to drop the pedal down in a mad dash toward some target before sending a car's driver straight through the windshield in an attempt to hit some target. Ragdoll drivers skip across water, bounce on basketball rims before dropping through hoops, and fly through fiery rings with the greatest of unease —and this never, ever gets old. **Greg Orlando**





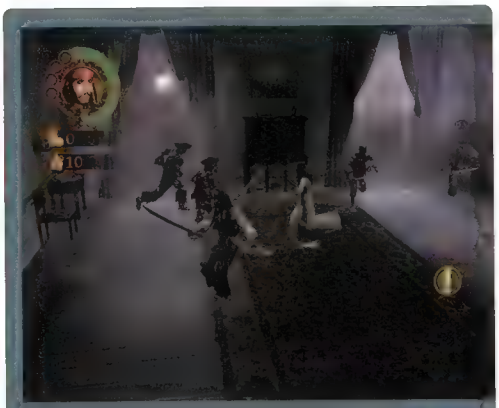
Lemmings

score 7.0

	PSP		NA
	Team 17		June
	SCEA		E

"Not much has changed in this latest take on Lemmings."

Not much has changed in this latest take on Lemmings. As a benevolent figure in charge of herding the docile packs of wobbly creatures along their way, you solve fun puzzles and make quick decisions through one pleasantly rendered level after another. The game works especially on PSP, but the appeal can only last for so long. ***BF***



Pirates of the Caribbean: Legend of Jack Sparrow

score 4.0

	PlayStation 2		NA
	7 Studios		June
	Bethesda		T

With its series of endless battle set-ups and tired interactive devices, Pirates of the Caribbean wouldn't be so bad, if not for the jittery character models with their dead visages and the soulless overall feel. 7 Studios like to have us stand in designated areas and press buttons when we're not engaged in mundane battle exercises. This is a studio in dire need of a visionary. It's a shame such a major license got caught in their net. ***DH***

Micro Machines v4

score 7.0

	PS2		1-4
	Supersonic		Ju
	Codemasters		E

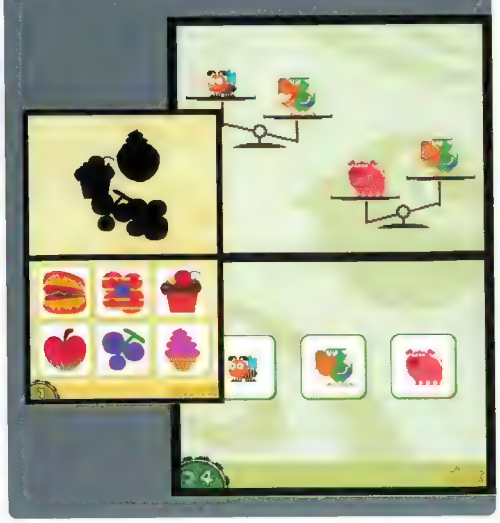
The idea of racing miniature cars through an obstacle course of giant-scale hazards is a fun one, but Micro Machines v4 doesn't do a whole lot to add much invention to what becomes an expected but fun game. Track design's good and there's a ton of cars to toy around with, joining a decent learning curve that tests your skills. The game looks decent too; just prepare to struggle a bit with perspective. ***BF***

Big Brain Academy

score 8.0

	NDS		NA
	Nintendo		June
	Nintendo		E

Like Brain Age before it, this unique mental exerciser may come with a little skepticism, but there's a touch more game this time, and a nicely satisfying set of testing scenarios. Big Brain Academy can only keep you entertained for so long before you tire of its routine, but the multiplayer this time out is an involving addition. ***BF***



Pac-Man World Rally

score 6.5

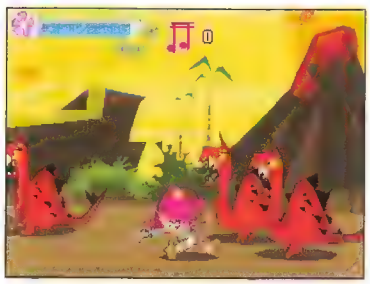
	PS2, GC, PSP, PC		NA
	Smart Bomb Int.		July/August
	Namco Bandai		E

How much or little you care for Pac Man Rally really depends on how much you want Pac Man Rally. Cherry, Grape, Watermelon etc., the circuit is par for the karting course, just add all of the perfunctory blips, bleeps, bombs and yellow balls along with Pac-Devil, Blinky, and all of the other Pac rats, and voila! You've got a theme park racer fit for a Pac fan. No replays, soft collision, and pesky bombs aside, PMWR is a fair rally game, and possibly the most brand-drenched racer ever. ***DH***

[redacted]

score 7.0

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	1-2 Player
Developer	Sensory Sweep Studios	**Available**	July
Publisher	D3 Publisher of America	**ESRB Rating**	E



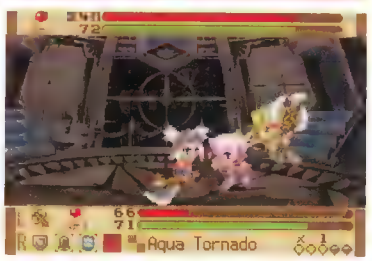
While 3D polygonal versions of my favorite J-Pop stars moving left to right bashing and smashing isn't exactly groundbreaking, I'm always up for a little crossover side-scrolling when it's done right---the simplicity of moving left to right, kicking butt—and if you're a Puffy fan, this one is big-time okay. We find Ami and Yumi in serious need of a muse to finish their latest album when Kaz, their sleaze ball manager, walks in with a pile of useless musical instruments from the pawn shop (washboard, glockenspiel, accordion…all the good stuff) one of which holds Gene the genie (Bowie humor—cute) who agrees to help them get their groove on in exchange for an autograph. Sending them to the legendary Mei Pei for training, the girls embark on a voyage through time seeking the ancient sounds from throughout history, achieved by Puffy and/or Yumi (you can go at it two-player or switch on the fly) strolling through a diversity of themed worlds bashing opponents with their guitars either by strumming with the stylus or via the buttons (the easy way out) until they reach the boss and hopefully summon their inner Pete Townshend. Along the way, breaking stuff reveals yen the girls can use at vending machines for more powerful guitars, wardrobe malfunctions, and tasty treats, or to warp back to the bus to powder the noses on those massive heads. The graphics are wonderfully inspired by the cartoon with nice parallax and a few cool 3D twists, and the music, including the full theme song in all of its hyper glory, is a tad repetitious but always extra caffeinated. **Dave Halverson**

Summon Night: Swordcraft Story

score 8.0

System	GBA	**Online/Multi**	2-Player Linked
Developer	Flight Plan	**Available**	July
Publisher	Atlus	**ESRB Rating**	E10+

Summon Night: Swordcraft Story really surprised me. Some parts of the game feel a bit too generic—almost all of the visuals outside of combat, for example—but given a chance there's a lot to like here. The journey to become a master Craftlord is fun, sprinkled with some interesting and likable characters, but what absolutely makes the game are the addictive side-scrolling real-time battles. **Eric L. Patterson**

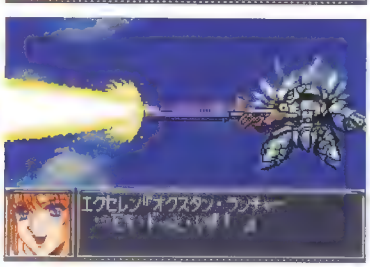


Super Robot Taisen: Original Generation

score 7.0

System	GBA	**Online/Multi**	None
Developer	Banpresto	**Available**	July
Publisher	Atlus	**ESRB Rating**	Teen

Super Robot Taisen finally makes its way to America courtesy of Atlus, sending fans of hardcore strategy gaming and giant robots into fits of jubilant celebration. Everyone else... I'm not so sure. The game's depth and unit customization is quite strong, as is its sweeping storyline, but the overall presentation, and user interface especially, are quite unfriendly to those who don't live and breathe grid-lined maps and screens overflowing with stats. **Eric L. Patterson**



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September
TBA

Final Fantasy III

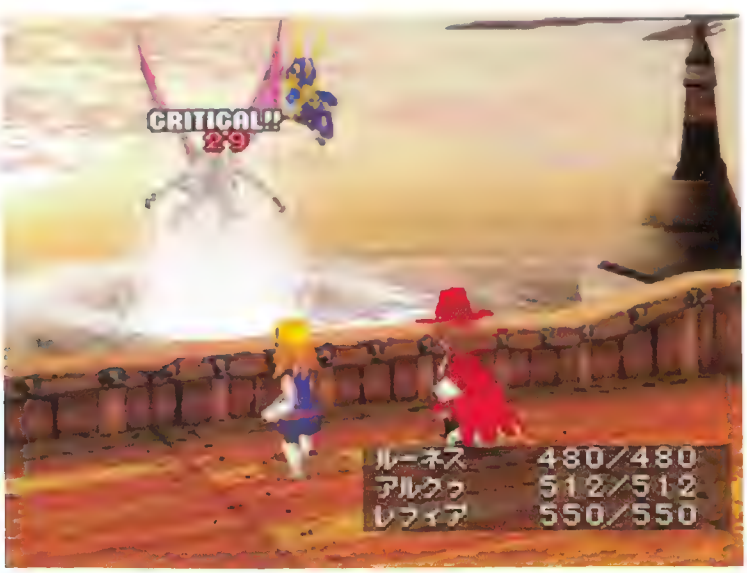
Back to their future

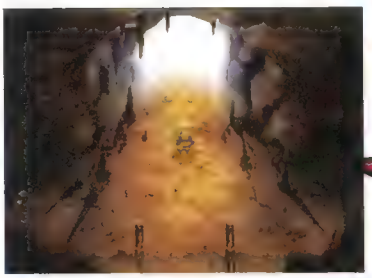
Nick Des Barres

Forget about FFII and V. FFIII is the true lost Final Fantasy in the West, never having had any release in any form whatsoever, beyond fan translations of the NES original. It is also the first significant Final Fantasy series remake, with serious storyline enhancements and fully polygonal presentation. Best of all, it's coming to the US a mere two months after its Japanese release.

So why should you be excited? First, FFIII represents the turning point when much of what we consider to be Final Fantasy crystallized (no pun intended) into a whole: It featured the first Job Change System, the debut of virtually every familiar Final Fantasy Job beyond the base Warrior, Monk, Thief, White Mage, Black Mage, and Red Mage, along with the first appearances of job-specific skills such as Steal for Thieves, and Jump for Dragoons. It also marked the first appearance of now-de rigour series mainstays summoned monsters and Moogles. As a game, it returned largely to FFI's notion of a loose story with no preset party members, and you controlled four nameless male orphans who set out to return balance to the world's Light and Darkness.

> "Graphically, the game is an absolute marvel. It is easily the best-looking polygonal game yet seen on the platform..."





Although the general story and layout of areas will remain unchanged from the original, FFIII on the DS massively revamps your party members into named individuals (Lughnes, Arcus, Leohia and Ingus) with actual personalities and backstories, and even reimagines one of them into a girl. This transformation is spearheaded by the game's original creator, Hiromichi Tanaka, recently of FFXI: Online fame, who returns as director for the DS version.

Other changes include a total reworking of the Job System, as many jobs in the original were essentially unusable and the Sage and Ninja wound up being ridiculously overpowered (indeed, when I first played the game back in the early 90s my party ended up consisting entirely of Sages). Tanaka cites his experience over several years balancing FFXI as his jumping-off point for the newly tweaked system. Another serious complaint about the original, the fact that the hours-long last dungeon had so save points whatsoever, has also been addressed (although perhaps only begrudgingly): Tanaka points to the portable nature of the DS demanding a save-anywhere scheme be in place.

A new perspective on battles once fought.

Graphically, the game is an absolute marvel. It is easily the best-looking polygonal game yet seen on the platform, though it concentrates almost entirely on one screen, using the other only for maps. Each iteration of every job for every character -- 92 in all -- has been completely redesigned from scratch by Akihiko Yoshida, character designer from FFXII and the Tactics series, and a lush CG FMV intro in the XII style has been smashed into the already-overflowing DS card (1024 Megabits!) as well.

What's not to love? It's a Final Fantasy you've (probably) never played, fully revamped from the ground up and portable wherever you go. Will you play it? Dude. Of course you will. The only true question is whether or not you'll be able to resist the siren's call of the oh-so-luminous DS Lite to do so.

Interview

by Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

> "We tried to stretch the battles across two screens at first, but it just looked cheap..."
> -Hiromichi Tanaka

play: First I'd like to ask, how different will this version of FFIII be from the Famicom original? Obviously its visuals are completely overhauled.
A: Yes, the visuals are redone from scratch, of course. It's been sixteen years since the original, and unlike the remakes of IV, V and VI it just wouldn't be right to use the original 3-color Famicom sprites. Our concept for the DS III is to use cutting-edge technology for the visuals, but the game structure remains the same, as do most of the map layouts. At first we thought, "If we're going 3-D why not make an all-new Final Fantasy for DS?" However, when III was decided, we knew we needed players of the original to think, "Yeah, this is III, all right." So you could say this game is a combination of the classic and brand-new. We've added personalities and backstories for the four main characters, and changed the original default job Onion Knight into a separate job from the new default, Normal.

So Onion Knight now has its own, new abilities and characteristics? Can it still equip anything?

Please wait for the game to find out (laughs).

What about features specific to the DS? Any use of touchpen?
Well, this is Final Fantasy III, a game designed long before dual screens and touchpens were available (laughs). We're concentrating on a great FFIII experience. However, you can use the touchpen to control the game, as well as to move characters at angles other than 45°. I really feel a lot of games on DS put emphasis on gimmicky uses of the dual screens and touchpen over real gameplay, and I was afraid we might change FFIII into something that it's not. But I'm very happy with the final result. For instance, in order to use the maximum number of polygons for battle scenes we use only one screen.

Yes, that intrigued me on the show floor. So that's a purely technical issue?
Yes. We tried to stretch the battles across two screens at first, but it just looked cheap. We couldn't use as many polygons and textures as we wanted. We do use the dual screens for certain events, however. By the same token, I think that displaying dungeons and so on on only one screen adds to the feeling of claustrophobia. Believe me, it's done on purpose. We had status up there at one point but it just didn't feel right (laughs).

I've read the job balance has been completely adjusted from the Famicom original. Certain jobs were definitely overpowered...would you say you've finally achieved your goal of the perfect Job Change System on DS?
Well, I really consider each Job Change System to be totally different. For example, V's Job Change System was V's Job Change System. XI's system was designed specifically for it. By the same token, this new system for III was really designed from the ground up for DS, so I consider it to be very close to perfect.

You were of course the director of the original Famicom Final Fantasy III as well. Is there anything you were able to include this time around that you weren't able to in the original?
Well, at Square we generally use ideas that didn't make it into games in the next project. For instance, I used a lot of ideas from FFIII in Secret of Mana. Speaking specifically of III, I always wanted the characters to have their own, unique personalities. On the DS I was able to achieve that.

Tell me about the CG FMV that was recently shown. Is that an intro only, or will there be CG throughout the game?
Just the intro. The difference between the DS polygon characters and what we could do with CG was just too extreme, so we didn't use any in the game on purpose.

The character design has been changed from the Famicom original. Is there any particular reason why?
It's very simple, really (laughs). The original character designer, Koichi Ishii, was too busy with the World of Mana project. He's also more suited to 2-D design, so after discussing this at length with him we hit upon the idea of Akihiko Yoshida, who had just finished FFXII and was free. It really was a matter of the right person at the right time. I think Yoshida was perfect for the DS FFIII.

So Mr. Yoshida designed every job for every character? That's a lot (laughs).
Yes it is! 23 jobs times 4 characters...92 designs in all (laughs).

Recent handheld FFs have added new dungeons and the ability to play as various party members who become inaccessible normally. In particular, FFIII has a lot of NPCs who come and go... might we see some hidden features that use them?
A sharp question (laughs). Please wait for the game to come out!

Something else I wanted to ask as a personal fan of FFIII...the last dungeon is infamous for being interminably long and without even a single save point. Will this be changed (laughs)?
Well, it's a handheld game, so...(laughs). You'll be able to temp save. We're thinking about people playing the game on the subway and stuff (laughs).

We're just about out of time...so can I ask for any message you might have for American FF fans waiting rabidly for III?
Thank you for waiting so long (laughs). We're so glad we're able to release Final Fantasy III in this form. The American release date is very soon after the Japanese, so you won't have to wait much longer. Please do enjoy Final Fantasy III!
play

[illegible]	PSP	[illegible]	Square-Enix	[illegible]	July 18
[illegible]	tri-Ace	[illegible]	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth

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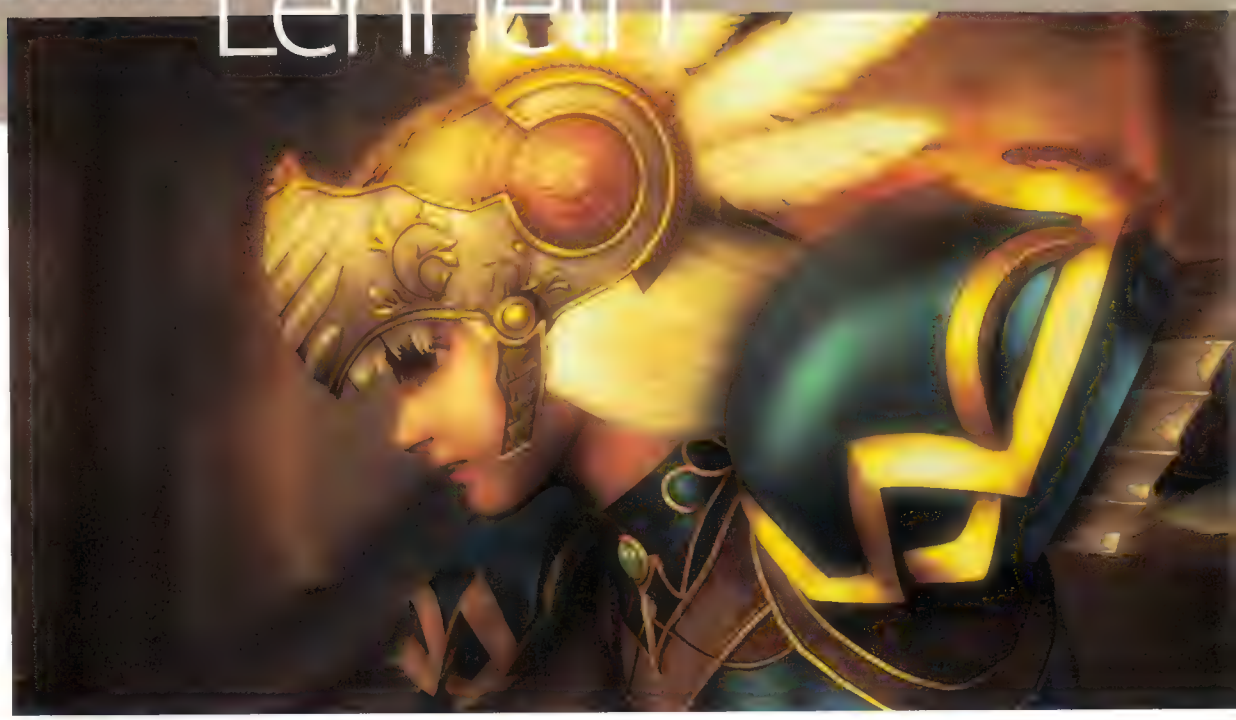

It isn't clear why Valkyrie Profile was allowed to slip through the Sony PSP no-remake ban, but if there's a game worth making an exception for, this is it. With the PlayStation original regularly selling for $150 on eBay and a PlayStation 2 sequel due in September, American gamers are long overdue for a second shot at this underrated classic.

For a 7-year old game, Lenneth holds up remarkably well. While most 3D PlayStation games now look hideously dated, the pre-rendered backdrops and beautifully hand-animated sprites of Valkyrie Profile look as good as they did in the salad days of the Clinton administration. And thanks to the PSP's widescreen format, you now get to see about 50% more of each side-scrolling town and dungeon, adding some panoramic splendor to the game's already beautiful environments.

Hand animated sprites never get old.

"American gamers are long overdue for a second shot at this underrated classic."

If you never played the original Valkyrie Profile, you missed what may have been the most original RPG of the PlayStation era. The battle system is a particular highlight—menus are non-existent, and instead each party character is simply mapped to a single button. By ordering your party to attack in the right order, you can slip through enemy defenses and juggle foes for extra hits.

The game's structure is similarly unconventional, perhaps to a fault. You play as Lenneth, a Valkyrie tasked with claiming the souls of fallen heroes. When you sense an impending death, you can fly in to witness the tragedy and recruit that character as a party member. Your ultimate goal is to level up these fallen souls by visiting the dungeons scattered throughout the world, and then send your heroes to prepare for Ragnarok—the final battle at the end of the world.

It's pretty original stuff, but the execution leaves a bit to be desired. The recruitment events are well-written and take place in beautiful locations, but you don't really interact with them beyond pressing the button to advance text. The dungeons are a lot of fun, but they have no connection to the storyline—they're simply a place to get experience and items. While the storyline gets a bit more intense towards the end of the game, Valkyrie Profile falls into an early rut of non-interactive event scenes followed by dungeons with no clear objective.

But it's easy to forgive the flaws of a game that's willing to take chances, especially when it succeeds more often than not. Valkyrie Profile is as inventive as it is beautiful, and while violating RPG norms doesn't always pay off for Lenneth, it makes for a far more interesting experience than the Dragon Quest clones that currently compose the bulk of the PSP's RPG library.

Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth

score 8.5

+	[illegible]
–	[illegible]

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Developer	Spellborn NV	Publisher	Spellborn International
Online/Offline	Presistent online	Available	November

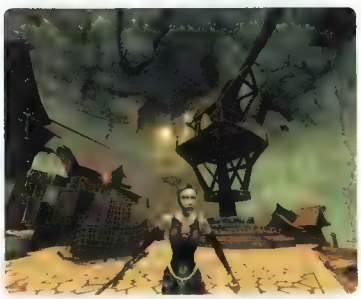
The Chronicles of Spellborn

Set adrift in a storm of magic

words **Mike Griffin**

A snapshot of the massively multiplayer online genre in mid-2006: WoW is still kicking ass, Guild Wars owns the (two-million) leftovers, and almost every recent MMO release seems to be floundering or sustaining a precariously low player base. This new reality does not deter Spellborn International, whose forthcoming fantasy MMO, The Chronicles of Spellborn, is on track for a Q4 2006 release. Why should you care about *this* MMO? Let's find out.

Hidden shard worlds hold many secrets.



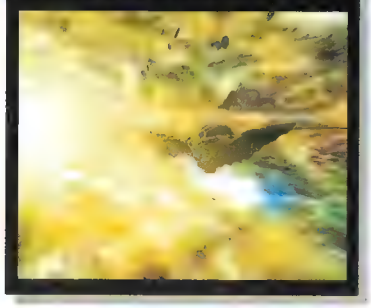
Magical light pierces the canopy, coaxing nature back to life.

Stepping away from the Lord of the Rings-style fantasy template, TCoS draws inspiration from films like The Dark Crystal and the fantasy works of Robert E. Howard and Michael Moorcock, as well as Larry Niven's The Magic Goes Away. Spellborn's shattered, post-apocalyptic universe spawned from the aftermath of a great demon empire's cataclysmic curtain call. The resulting explosion created the Deadspell Storm, a giant maelstrom of shifting magic. Floating inside the storm are hollow rock realms and inside these shards live the survivors that have rebuilt civilization. The two surviving races, the Humans (previously servant-slaves of the empire) and the Daevi (descendants of the empire), have patched up their differences—but other forces are less than thrilled to have their lands desecrated.

Oceans and mountains torn asunder, these shards have come a long way. Based on concepts by comic artists Romano Molenaar and Chris Evenhuis and built using a heavily retrofitted Unreal 2.5 engine with modernized lighting, shadow, flora and character rendering systems, the shard realms of Ringfell, Canyx, Parliament, Mount of Heroes and Quarterstone are home to five High Houses all vying for power. There are no obvious good or evil distinctions between each House, only different political agendas. The game will ship with almost 1500 unique hand-crafted quests designed to lead players across the Deadspell nebula and into the depths of each shard. It's not all high adventure

Before the storm: Ancestral Quests

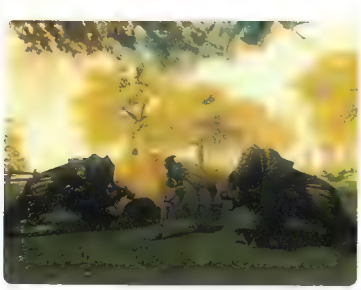
The Oracle can teach players how to safely navigate Shardships through the Deadspell Storm to new shards, but first several challenges must be met in the form of Ancestral Quests. Here, the Oracle will grant you visions of the ancient pre-cataclysm realm and you'll experience first-hand the unrest leading up to the sundering of the Ancestor world.



and monster-slaying, however. Spellborn will also have extensive PvP competition between Houses, including regular events at the Quarterstone arena and Guild Wars-like leaderboards.

Eschewing auto-attack toggles, Spellborn tips its hat to D&D Online with twitch controls and reticule aiming: put a baddie in your crosshair, choose a skill and fire away—much like you'd choose a weapon and shoot in a FPS. Spellborn's combat flow uses an extensive Guild Wars-style skilldeck and a sprawling combo system (complete with dozens of openers and finishers), allowing sword attacks and fireballs to chain into condition relief like buffs and heals. Combat is very active in Spellborn. The Rune Mage class, for example, can draw cursing symbols on strategic areas of the battlefield, while the Blood Warrior is able to create a "bloodlink" between himself and party members to keep them protected during battle. Instead of a death penalty, TCoS players will be rewarded for staying alive: the longer you can go without croaking, the better the bonus. It will be desirable to play smart and live to fight another day.

With its highly unique universe and action-based gameplay, The Chronicles of Spellborn easily stands out in a quickly-becoming-saturated genre. Here's hoping it can execute on those ideas; after all, MMO players are a lot more finicky in a post-WoW world.



Interview

The Chronicles of Spellborn Soundtrack

Mike Griffin

Leave it to Jesper Kyd to create a non-cliché soundtrack for a fantasy MMO. Best known for his award-winning *Hitman* scores, Kyd's *The Chronicles of Spellborn* music once again demonstrates the composer's uncanny ability to bring film soundtrack grandeur to any genre using a patented mix of electronic, choral and orchestral sounds.

SOUND CHECK

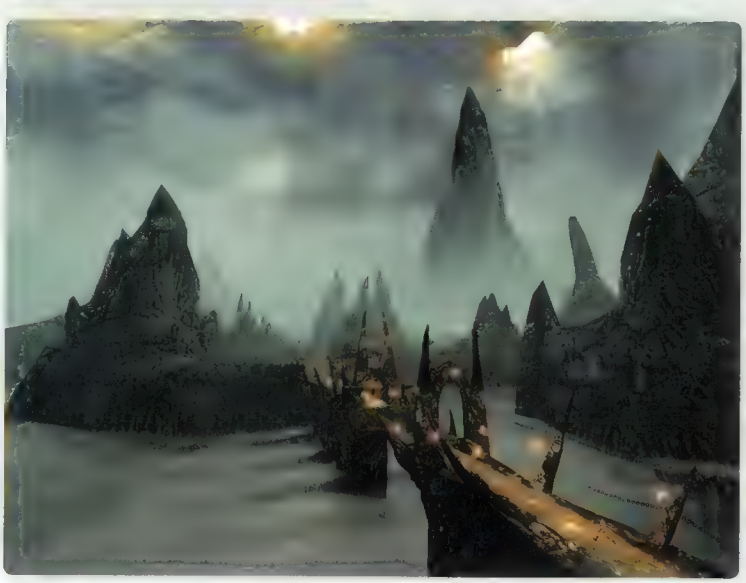
Jesper's studio setup during the Spellborn sessions

7 different computers, including: G5, VisionDAW and Carillon systems.

Vienna, East West, Miroslav, SAM and Siedlaczek orchestral libraries.

Favorite apps: Cubase SX, Gigastudio 3, Pro Tools, Kontakt 2 and Reaktor 5.

Sound gear: Promega3, Emu 6400s, JP8080, CS80, FS1R, JD990, MPC1000, MachineDrum, An200 + Dx200, Juno 60, VL1, Andromeda and Powercore.



"The pulse running throughout the score is hope for the future mixed in a deep, gloomy, atmospheric and tranquil mindset."

JESPER KYD

play: What kind of personal and professional experience did you have with MMORPGs prior to The Chronicles of Spellborn?
Jesper Kyd: Professional experience: none, but I'm familiar with many of the popular titles out there and I wanted to try my hand at writing an MMO score. I feel a lot of MMO and RPG scores sound the same and I wanted to write something more distinct, something that is not inspired by Lord of the Rings.

play: Did a specific musical direction enter your mind the first time you checked out Spellborn's concepts?
JK: Unique and atmospheric came to mind. Spellborn is an exceptional world and when I saw the game I knew right away this would be a great opportunity to create something really different. The first tracks I wrote were the two main themes. The writing process usually doesn't happen this way, since it makes sense to write main themes closer to the middle or end of music production. Developing the themes when you're further into the project usually makes more sense because you can spend time testing the music in-game and you will have a much better idea of what people like and what works. But after talking with the developers and hearing more about the Spellborn universe, I knew right away what kind of music I wanted to create.

play: Tell us about particular elements of the game that played an important role in evolving these first impressions of Spellborn into a final musical vision.
JK: The epic disaster that shattered the world of Spellborn was a major influence. The world is now divided into shards floating inside a magical Deadspell Storm and this magical storm is important to the score. The Oracle and the historical elements you uncover while playing the game were also significant sources of inspiration.

Epic choirs are mixed with acoustic instruments, sound design and organic, electronic music. I think the score sounds more personal than anything I have done before. The darker elements in Spellborn are also well represented, but this dark music never becomes overbearing or depressing. The pulse running throughout the score is hope for the future mixed in a deep, gloomy, atmospheric and tranquil mindset.

play: Many gamers feel that MMOs are trapped in a design rut. For its part, how do you think music can evolve in the massively multiplayer genre?
JK: I think we are at the first stage of the evolution of MMO music. Traditionally, MMOs include a lot of generic fantasy music, mostly LotR-inspired. By replicating this kind of score you miss out on an important asset: basically, you only get what is expected, so the music will not help the game stand out and become noticed. I am confident this will change in the future as the MMO genre evolves. **play**

Infernal

If James Bond was the son of Satan

Mike Griffin

Metropolis Software	Playlogic International
None	November

"...infernal powers provide you with all sorts of toys: mystical prescience, object teleportation, soul-drain healing, ghost form..."

We finally get a chance to dance with the devil in Infernal, Playlogic's forthcoming third-person action shooter. In development at Metropolis Software, Infernal is looking impressive. In fact, it's tempting to say that Metropolis could be the most skilled Polish developer since People Can Fly, and Infernal—which rumors have also pegged for 360 and PS3—is undoubtedly going to be their breakthrough title.

Infernal's protagonist is Ryan Lennox, a top international special agent and a devil incarnate from the depths of the underworld. Ryan pursues terrorists and rogue spirits in equal measure, manipulating the latest hi-tech spy gear and calling forth innate supernatural powers. He isn't the only one of his kind on the mortal plane, however. Agents from both heaven and hell fight a secret war for souls. It's usually a tenuous—though self-regulating—equilibrium, but something is amiss. Rogue angels have banded together to eliminate all of Hell's agents. As the dark one's last topside lieutenant, Ryan must get to the bottom of this not-so-angelic conspiracy and restore the balance while masquerading as a secret agent.

Playlogic supplied an updated version of their E3 build featuring three big, near-complete levels: medieval monastery, refinery and industrial sewers. The game's intuitive controls feel good right away, and while Ryan's jumping animation is a bit stiff, he's a limber devil with double-tap dash rolls, cover fire lean-in, and quick stance changes using the mouse wheel. He can climb fences, back flip off ladders and bust out martial arts on the fly. Flicking through context displays will cycle items and weapons in pseudo-MGS fashion with a minimal HUD and clever audio cues. As the screenshots indicate, the game has a squeaky clean next-gen engine with strong lighting and shader effects. The enemy voice acting is also surprisingly good.

Ryan's cool infernal powers provide you with all sorts of toys: mystical prescience, object teleportation, soul-drain healing, ghost form, or channel the power of Hell directly into regular items and weapons. Infra-vision goggles instantly become angel vision goggles and guns gain various magical properties. Infernal's enemy foot soldiers make effective use of object cover, side-stepping and rolling to temporary safety. The game's environment design is highly interactive and destructible (laced with Ageia physics), and many cover fire objects can be blown to bits with both ordnance and devil magic.

The more we play Infernal, the more it feels like our first experiences (cue the Keanu-style "Whoa") with early coverage of Painkiller and Far Cry when they first slipped out of Europe; an unexpected level of quality from then-obscure developers. Let's hope this quality remains consistently high throughout Infernal when it ships later this year.

Titan Quest

The anti-Zeus is on the loose

Review

words **Mike Griffin**

Developer	Iron Lore	Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	Online co-op	Available	June

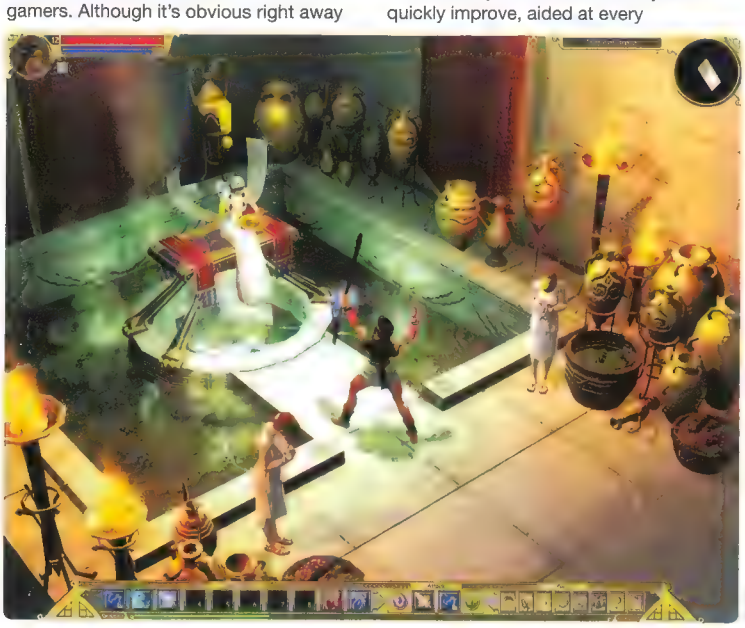
THQ has a solution for the summer PC game drought and Titan Quest is its name. A first-time effort from Iron Lore, whose president and lead designer Brian Sullivan co-created the Age of Empires franchise, Titan Quest presents a frenetic action-RPG in the vein of Diablo 2, with a slick 3D engine and a bestiary of nasty foes from ancient mythology.

Titan Quest streamlines its character creation (a simple male/female selection suffices) and virtually every facet of the interface and point-and-click controls should be familiar technique for PC gamers. Although it's obvious right away that you're dealing with a very polished, very competent game, the early part of TQ is a rather soporific jaunt. Well-voiced NPCs keep the plot moving along in towns, but the narrative is rarely given a chance to sustain its momentum. Even the optional side-quests miss the opportunity to spin meaningful tales and tasks, as you're dispatched to generic mini-catacombs that are little more than loot warehouses. There simply isn't enough punctuation weaving through the structural grammar of the game's early level design.

Thankfully TQ's levels and objectives quickly improve, aided at every opportunity by an excellent multi-discipline class tree. As you witness the sheer magnitude of the game, roving across untold leagues of ancient Greece, Egypt and China alone or co-op, character advancement and specialization are consistently satisfying and addicting. Early skill choices rarely become obsolete, as they can be enhanced with more active and passive powers at higher levels of mastery. There are tons of weapons and armor sets, and in accordance with The Handbook of RPG Loot Design, each piece can be fitted with stat- and effect-boosting enhancements. It's possible to create some very interesting and powerful character builds to clear rooms of very nicely modeled lizardmen, zombies, minotaurs, gorgons and the rest of the evil host marching in defiance of the gods.

> "...Witness the sheer magnitude of the game, roving across untold leagues of ancient Greece, Egypt and China..."

Though Titan Quest is slightly diminished by early pacing issues and flat ancillary quests, when it flexes its considerable action-RPG might, the words *great contemporary Diablo 2 clone* seem pertinent and welcome, like the tangle of wicked hordes on screen.



Titan Quest

score 8.0

\+ Familiar and effective controls. Good looking models, flora and lighting. Map making tool and full online co-op campaign

\- Vanilla side quests do not inspire. Not enough fast-paced music. Inventory, desperately, needs a good auto-sorting feature

ask alienware

no. 004 // august 2006

Q. I'm looking to upgrade my computer's power supply as I add a more powerful video card. What's a good Watt rating for a power supply if I'm planning to go SLI in a few months? Are there certain power supply specs that are noteworthy? Mark, Laredo TX.

Alienware: Hardware will continue to get more powerful so it is important not to overlook your power supply. If you are planning on upgrading to a dual graphics solution in a few months, you are working in the right direction by checking your power supply. To ensure you are fully supported for dual graphics and future upgrades (additional hard drives, higher end graphics, physics processing, etc.), you will want to have at least a 700 watt power supply. You will be covered in the short term while being prepared for later upgrades.

upgraded until the next generation of that system, PCs deliver improved graphics cards as soon as they are available, providing the user with a better graphics experience. Let's face it: a gamer is a gamer and most have both a PC and one or two consoles. With that being said, the gaming horsepower in a PC is more powerful and is easily upgradeable.

Q. I don't have a PC help question per se. It's more of a general inquiry about relative gaming horsepower: How do the next-gen consoles like Xbox 360 and PS3 compare to a current high-end gaming PC, in terms of muscle and flexibility? Will, Parker CO.

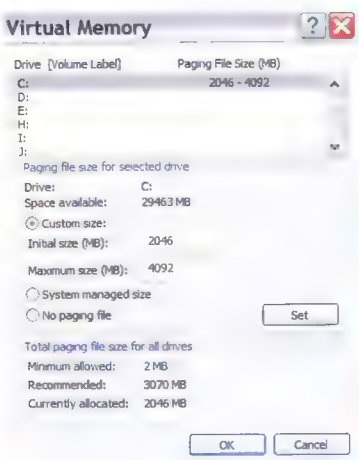
Alienware: As with any next-gen console release, the graphics experience is comparable with the *current* generation of high-end gaming PCs. Since the specifications of consoles are not typically

Q. The inside of my computer seems to be a magnet for dust. The area around the PC is regularly cleaned, but the machine still collects a lot of dust, especially around fans. I do my best to remove dust from visible areas, but I'm sure it's getting into nooks and crannies. How harmful is excess dust for computer parts? Miguel, Lincoln NE.

Alienware: Excess dust and particles definitely have a negative effect on the performance of any system. It is important to clean out the inside of the system every so often, so that the dust does not accumulate to the point where your system begins to overheat and the system crashes. The PC can begin to overheat because the flow of air generated by the fans is now obstructed—causing potentially dangerous heat to build up.

Q. Virtual memory is confusing. I hear many different recommendations regarding how to set the page file in Windows XP. I have 1 GB of system memory. Is it better to let Windows manage the page file, or should I use custom values? This is for gaming, by the way. Ben, Atlanta GA.

Alienware: Truly, the safest way is to allow Windows to manage your virtual memory. If you set your virtual memory too high or too low then it can slow down your computer. There are certain applications where you can get a performance benefit by increasing your virtual memory but it is still safer to let windows manage it.



"To ensure you are fully supported for dual graphics and future upgrades, you will want to have at least a 700 watt power supply."

NEXT-GENERATION ALIENWARE DESKTOP CHASSIS REVEALED

Introducing Alienware's next-gen desktop design: the Alienware Evolution Full Tower Chassis. Capable of delivering maximum performance in a fully customizable package, the Evolution chassis is equipped with Alienware SpectraFX; an innovative new lighting feature that allows users to custom configure 5 different zones of their Evolution chassis with a large spectrum of lighting choices.

Postscript

EA acquires Mythic, sets sights on MMO space

Cementing its position as the game industry's ultimate gold-farmer, Electronic Arts announced its acquisition of Mythic Entertainment in late June. The privately-held Maryland-based developer, whose catalog spans more than a decade of gaming and a 10-year history, has spoken from a humble mid-range team to today's Mythical (Worlds) EA subsidiary. Mythic's breakout hit was veteran Dark Age of Camelot in the dust, but the real "what lies" in this instance is the forthcoming Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning MMO – now poised to challenge World of Warcraft's dominance in the genre.

Just we forget, EA's past Ultima Online forays into the persistent online space of the 21st century (Ultima Worlds Online: Origin, Ultima Online: Kingdom, The Sims Online, Motor City Online, Earth & Beyond) and the developmental demise of multiplayer Ultima reboot Ultima X: Odyssey, EA's success with WAR has no doubt been fueling its every action as they've been buying up Bay Raging and, until Mythic, have shut of the few successful online games really fan-driven franchises for a generation. We spoke Mythic CEO Mark Jacobs about this deal and the future of WAR on PC and console.

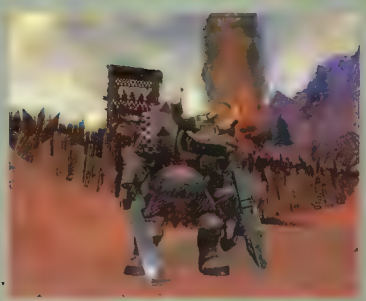
Interview

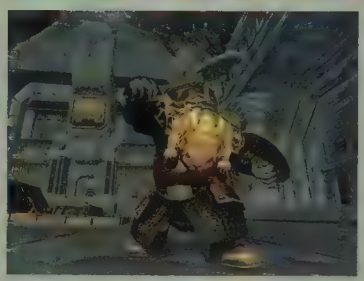
Mark Jacobs
Co-founder and CEO, **Mythic**

play: It is no secret that EA hasn't had the best of luck recently with consistent state online games. How is Mythic going to change EA's massively multiplayer track record?

MJ: Well, first I want to say that EA's track record in this space is a lot more interesting than people know. If you look at it, the last two games EA's published and invested with (Ultima Online and Ultima Online: Kingdoms) were the two most successful games in the history of the industry. And to that Mythic is going to increase EA's track record by one as well. We have been impressed with Mythic and EA from the very beginning. Mythic and EA have a very similar culture. In this regard, I believe that we can help EA understand and appreciate the development process and how to make a game successful. And we have a lot in common with the way we work [...]

play: Ok, so what does EA bring to the table in terms of Mythic's MMO development process, and is EA prepared to let the developers [...]





play: Wow!
MJ: Wow, wasn't EA bring to the table? They have a tremendous presence in publishing, distribution and marketing across multiple platforms. Frankly, even technology that I know we were [illegible] EA's ability to leverage and build on [illegible] EA is great at taking a game and [illegible] EA is great at taking a game and [illegible] EA is great at taking a game and

< Nick Des Barres

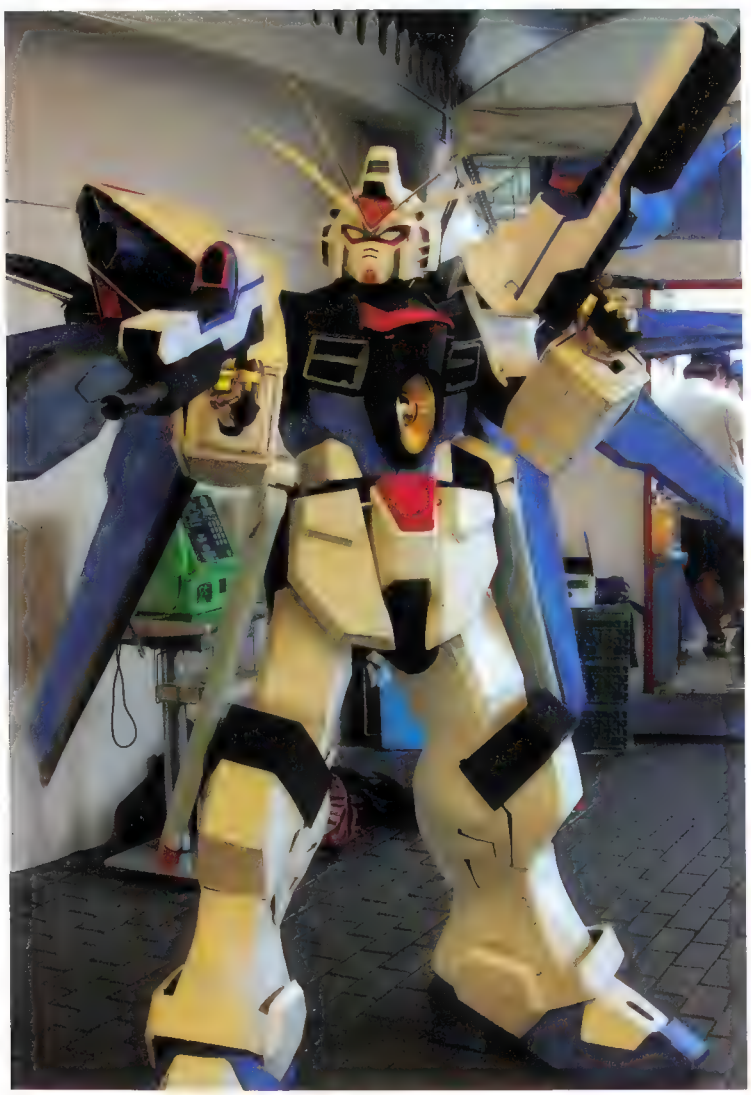
Dai Kohama >

Cosplay Culture in Japan

Dress to impress

words Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

What is Cosplay? Short for Costume Play, Cosplay is considered an entire subculture in Japan -- fans dressing up elaborately as their favorite game, anime, manga and movie characters. In the world of Cosplay, anything goes -- girls as guys, guys as girls, and everything in between (including giant robots). Pictures speak louder than words, so enjoy this pictorial collecting photographs from Comiket Summer '05, Winter '05, and Cosplay Festa 2006, Japan's largest Cosplay event, held last month.



Strike Freedom Gundam ~ Gundam SEED

Kasumi ~ Dead Or Alive

Black Jack ~ Black Jack

Frieza ~ Dragon Ball Z

Hero & Lymsleia ~ Suikoden V

Kamen Rider Hibiki ~ Kamen Rider Hibiki

Iruka & Kakashi ~ Naruto

Scenery

Angolmois ~ Sgt. Frog

Lulu ~ Final Fantasy X

Cloud & Aerith ~ Final Fantasy VII

Rei Ayanami ~ Evangelion

Parin & Pino ~ Gurumin

Bulleta, Sasquatch, Jedah ~ Vampire

Fullmetal Alchemist Characters -- Fullmetal Alchemist

Hayao Miyazaki, Totoro, Porco Rosso ~ Studio Ghibli

Rikku ~ Final Fantasy X-2

June ~ Star Gladiator

	PSP		Square-Enix		Now (Japan)
	Think Garage		NA	ESRB Rating	NA

Dragon Quest & Final Fantasy in Itadaki Street Portable

Three great tastes that taste great together

Dai Kohama

Quick! Name world-famous designer Yuji Horii's long-running game series! Dragon Quest? Yeah, sure. But there's also Itadaki Street. Never heard of it? Unsurprising, since it's never been granted a release outside of Japan, and, well...it's a board game.

It's also brilliant. Little surprise from the man who created, directed, wrote and produced every Dragon Quest ever made. In Japan, Yuji Horii is revered as semidivine, and it's not just because of DQ. Itadaki Street (in this sense, meaning something like "I'll take that!") has seen countless iterations since its 1991 debut on Famicom. This latest PSP incarnation, Dragon Quest & Final Fantasy in Itadaki Street Portable, as the title implies, judiciously throws Square Enix's crown jewels into the mix. Rather than a cheap cash-in crossover, however, DQ&FF has turned out to be the finest Itadaki Street ever, and well worth your attention should you have even the most passing interest in board games.

I'll add a postscript to that. I am not a big board game guy. Sure, they're a pleasant enough diversion to while away the hours with friends, but against a computer? Are you kidding? Give me some blades, some explosions, some human drama. I freely admit what drew me to this game were the characters -- Cloud, Sephiroth, DQ Slimes, FF Chocobos -- and after playing the game endlessly for days emerged a changed man. Yes, I had become a board game man...and proud to admit it. Itadaki Street is quite simply *relentlessly* addictive, and all the DQ/FF trappings are just so much icing on a sweet, spongy, crême-filled cake.

A game of Itadaki Street goes something like this. Four players (you versus three computer-controlled opponents, or in the best-case situation, three of your real-life buddies) bounce around a game board buying up property and stocks, then selling if the need arises. If it sounds a lot like Monopoly, that's because it is. If a player goes bankrupt, the person with the highest amount of Gold wins. Alternatively, reaching a pre-set maximum amount of Gold also nets you the victory. It may seem deceptively simple, but the rules are such that it could never exist as a physical board game, as a CPU is required for the calculation of stocks and payment.

It's an incredibly fun game by itself (if a bit difficult to describe; you really have to play to understand how it works, and to this end the built-in tutorial comes in quite handy), but what slides DQ&FF into "8" territory is the presentation. Countless characters from DQs and FFs past and present (including virtually the entire casts of DQVIII and FFXII) are available as player characters, rendered in a uniform, cute SD style. The utter charm of these models, and their note-perfect personalities (developers Think Garage are clearly *huge* Square Enix fans) make the game an instant joy to play for the die-hard RPG lover. Ever wondered how Cloud and Sephiroth might finish their fateful duel over a board game? Now's your chance to find out. The lush backgrounds, also all taken from familiar DQ/FF locations, are fairly teeming with life, and beautiful, sweeping arrangements of familiar tunes from the series seal the deal. Visually and aurally, DQ&FF is simply a delight.

"Yes, I had become a board game man...and proud to admit it..."

For the serious DQ and/or FF fan, I really cannot recommend this game enough. It's fairly import-friendly, and even if you know no Japanese you should be able to figure out what everything does. It *is* a simple board game, after all. I must, however, raise three caveats. First, the load times are appalling. Nearly a full minute goes by before a game begins, and individual games are often too long for the short gaming-bursts handheld experiences tend to provide. Finally, although the one-player game is long and rewarding with several hidden characters and stages to unlock, Itadaki Street is ideally played with friends. If you can jive with the above, or are just looking for something a little different on PSP, Yuji Horii wants you to play Dragon Quest & Final Fantasy in Itadaki Street Portable. Go on, make the man proud.

score 8.0

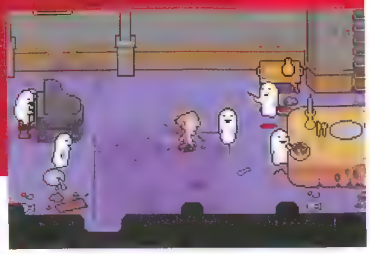
Godzilla's worst nightmare

© 2006 ARMOR PROJECT/SQUARE ENIX All Rights Reserved. © KOICHI SUGIYAMA FINAL FANTASY Characters: © SQUARE ENIX DRAGON QUEST Characters: © ARMOR PROJECT/BIRD STUDIO/SQUARE ENIX CHARACTER ILLUSTRATION: SHIRO AMANO

GameBoy Advance | Nintendo | Now (Japan)
Nintendo | NA | NA

MOTHER 3

Shigesato Itoi's gift to the world



words Dai Kohama

"Don't cry until the end." This was the slogan for the original Mother 1 -- the prequel to EarthBound on SNES -- and one virtually every Japanese of my generation remembers. Twelve years on from Mother 2, I was unable to comply with this rule. Over the course of Shigesato Itoi's Mother 3, I cried three times. Real tears, influenced by a tiny collection of pixels on a two-and-a-half-inch screen in front of me.

Mother 3 isn't a good game. It's a timeless masterpiece that completely exploded my expectations. As many of you probably know, M3 was slated to be released on the Nintendo 64DD, before that platform imploded and was finally cancelled in late 2000. I even remember the day -- August 22nd -- and I was absolutely crushed. To think that I'd never get to play a Mother 3...well, it was unthinkable.

But the gods smiled, and the game was remade on GameBoy Advance. It feels like it belongs here, in a simple, bold, primary-colored world, hearkening back to the Famicom original. Don't be fooled by these screens -- this isn't a poorly-art-directed game. This is the way it's meant to be, and with good reason: It's Mother.

I could go on about this game for ten pages, but on half a page one has to pick and choose. The game itself is a standard RPG, but the battles are something very new. So new, and yet so simple, I found myself wondering aloud, "Why the heck hasn't anyone ever done this before?" The monsters' heartbeats are integrated into the battle music, and you must press buttons in rhythm with them to fight effectively, as in a beatmania-style music sim. This eliminates the humdrum "mash A" RPG convention and is actually quite fun, right up to the end of the game.

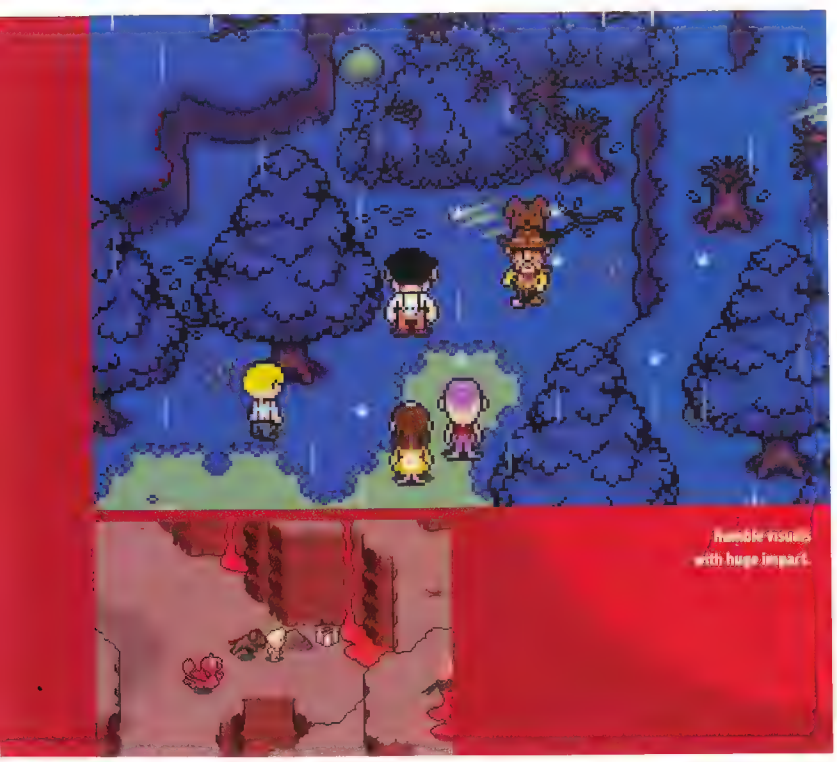
"Mother 3 isn't a good game. It's a timeless masterpiece that completely exploded my expectations."

Obviously, what makes Mother 3 so great is its *truly* brilliant story. It's easy enough to bandy about such terms, but that's what this game's story really is -- sheer brilliance. I won't ruin it on the off chance Mother 3 should come out in America, but suffice to say it's packed with a good deal of tragedy, comedy, kindness, viciousness and everything in between. It's not just a great video game story...it's a great story, period. In particular, the feeling of catharsis Mother 3 provides is profound -- I am truly grateful that I, as a human being, was able to play this game.

It's a terrible shame Mother 3 isn't slated to be released in America as EarthBound 2. Americans deserve to play it. The remake

Mother 1 + 2 was also recently released on GBA, and I'd get on hands and knees to ask Nintendo to release these two products in English. If I, as one man, can make a case for the release, allow me to say this: To confirm my feelings about Mother 3, I loaded up my save data for another play.

I found myself breaking Shigesato Itoi's rule for the fourth time.



Humble visuals with huge impact.

© 2006 SHIGESATO ITOI / Nintendo
Sound © 2006 HAL Laboratory, Inc. / Nintendo

GAME REVIEW

Dragon Quest

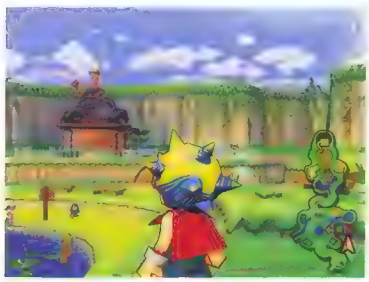
PlayStation 2	Square Enix
Cavia	NA

Now (Japan)	
NA	

Joy Yangus and the Mysterious Dungeon

Spin-off fat camp for morbidly obese DQ heroes

Dai Kohama



Randomly generated screens (just kidding).

The Mysterious Dungeon series began as a Dragon Quest spin-off in 1993, and while only a handful of its titles have seen a US release (Chocobo's Dungeon, Torneko: The Last Hope, and the upcoming Pokémon Mystery Dungeon titles), it has had an amazingly prosperous run in Japan. Now the series has come back to its DQ spin-off roots, hosting the childhood tale of DQVIII's semi-beloved Yangus. While fresh blood from a new generation of Dragon Quest heroes has revitalized the series a bit, it can't change the fact that the series' mechanics haven't evolved in 13 years.

If you've never played a Mysterious Dungeon title, here's how it works: Each game consists of a central town with shops and storyline characters, and a handful of dungeons whose maps, items, and enemy placements are randomly computer-generated each time you enter. A crude, turn-based battle system allows you to move freely until you approach a foe, at which point you take turns hitting each other or using items. Whenever you leave a dungeon, your level returns to 1, but you get to keep all your items, making it a little bit easier to slog your way back through the same (but now re-randomly generated) dungeon.

I won't mince words here: This random dungeon crap was questionable in the '90s and it's utterly pathetic now. *Phantasy Star Online* proved six years ago that it's possible to have randomly generated dungeons that look good and have some sort of structure, but Square-Enix hasn't followed its lead. Yangus is still locked in the same ugly overhead perspective as 1993's original Torneko, and the dungeon "design" remains nonexistent; you merely wander aimlessly, hoping to stumble upon some good items (but not hidden traps!) on your way to the stairs to the next floor. There's some rudimentary strategy to the battles, but nowhere near enough to keep the game interesting for as long as it takes to beat.

While the developers seem perfectly happy with their 1993 game mechanics, they do offer some 21st-century treats for those who are willing to endure them. The game is packed with decent quality animated cut-scenes that appear not just at the beginning and end of the game, but after every major plot point. The soundtrack is the work of inimitable DQ composer Kouichi Sugiyama, and while it's mostly tunes recycled from previous Dragon Quest games, there are a few new tracks and some of them are really, really good. Finally, it's nice to see familiar DQVIII characters like Gelda and Morrie again. The promise of new tunes, nice cut-scenes, and a Pokémon-esque system of catching and combining monsters may be enough to keep you engaged with Yangus's quest for a day or two, but it isn't enough to make up for the primitive mechanics at its core.

DQ: Yangus and the Mysterious Dungeon — score 5.0

+

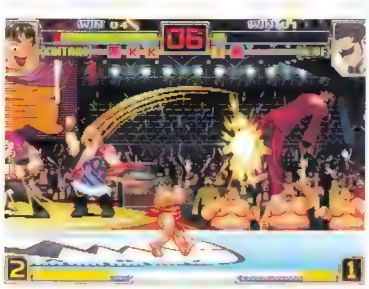
–

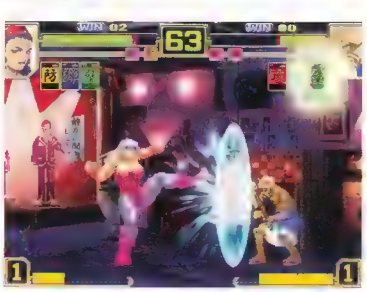
Shin Goketsuji Ichizoku

Old-school pixel art VS. blistering tunes

System	PlayStation 2
Developer	Noise Factory
Publisher	Excite

Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now (Japan)
ESRB Rating	NA





Anyone remember Power Instinct, that crazy wannabe SFII series from Atlus featuring old ladies with projectile false teeth, and nearly-nude preteen boys that transform into giant anthropomorphic dogs? It's back, baby. Shin Goketsuji Ichizoku ("New Goketsuji Family") is the latest iteration of the venerable series, based on Toukon, the previous entry and one of the last Neo•Geo games. Goketsuji is essentially identical to Toukon, with the addition of an interesting card system that allows you to customize characters virtually any way you like, loading them up with new abilities (and destroying game balance in the process). It's all good, however, as this game isn't made to be taken seriously. It's what one might call Fighting Comedy. The general insanity is backed up by the game's finest feature -- its music, every track a vocal. This is where the game truly shines, brilliantly parodying everything from death metal to Japanese enka. It's nearly worth the price of admission for the tunes alone, and character designs from anime god Range Murata sure don't hurt. **Nick Des Barres**

Shin Goketsuji Ichizoku — score 7.0

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The Crime Scene Investigator

Nothing to do with CSI

System	Nintendo DS
Developer	Tomcat System
Publisher	D3 Publisher

Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now (Japan)
ESRB Rating	NA

The Phoenix Wright effect continues in Japan, with D3 Publisher's The Kanshikikan (Crime Scene Investigator) picking up the torch. Part of D3's The Simple 2800 series (the games only cost ¥2,800, or about $25, a far cry from the usual ¥4,800 in Japan). CSI may at first appear to be a classic Japanese digital comic, though it is really anything but. The game has you take control of rookie crime scene investigator Shikiko Enami, using the DS touchpen to search for hidden fingerprints and reassemble shattered evidence. You then collaborate with various scientific specialists to help solve the crime. It may seem like an obvious idea for a DS game, and it is -- but why hasn't anyone done it before? In particular, CSI really shines in the area of its characterization. It is witty, well-written, and everyone has a fully fleshed-out personality...much like Capcom's Phoenix Wright games, from which it is obviously inspired. When your assistant is a demonic cat named Nekomata you know you can't go wrong. For ¥2800, CSI is a steal, and if you just can't get enough Phoenix Wright by all means check it out.
Dai Kohama

The Crime Scene Investigator — score 7.5

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play anime

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24 eps on 5 DVDs

** Artwork subject to change*

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Released by	Bandai Entertainment	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	13 and up	Available	Now

My-HiME

More than meets the eye

words **Heather Campbell**

At first glance, My-HiME looks like something unremarkable. Mai, and her sickly brother Takumi, are new students at Fuuka Academy. As they take a ferry to their new school, they are suddenly thrust into the crossfire of a battle between two girls, Mikoto and Natsuki. As the fight crescendos, Mai discovers she has dormant magical powers, and uses them to protect her brother and end the mysterious skirmish. What a surprise, right? An anime heroine with secret magical powers! Next thing you know, My-HiME will feature giant robots, and a school where almost everyone does battle on a daily basis. Right?

Wait for it.

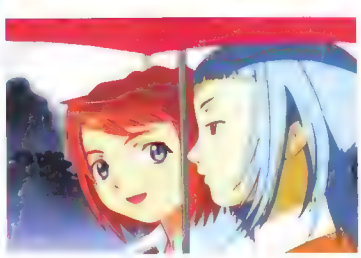
Even though she's warned to stay away from Fuuka Academy, Mai enrolls anyway, and in doing so solidifies her destiny as a HiME – a young soldier using Highly-Advanced Materializing Equipment. Soon, sheepish Mai is battling huge monsters called Orphans, harnessing Final Fantasy-like summons, and befriending other HiME in a ho-hum anime with fanservice we've all seen before, magical action that could be from any show, and character comedy that doesn't transcend the genre.

That is, at first glance.

The truth is My-HiME has a secret that makes the entire series worth watching.

These stereotypical setups are the stage on which a new, emotional drama unfolds in the latter half of the show. Add sharp character design and animation that is rarely off-model, accompanied by a sweeping soundtrack by Yuki Kajiura, and you have the makings of an anime series that would be easy to dismiss after a glimpse, but hard to forget after a full viewing. Sunrise has accomplished a very difficult task with My-HiME; making a genuinely engaging show that is vastly superior to the sum of its parts. Clichés are delivered in thick, broad strokes, but the picture you're left with is a surprisingly deep and sometimes unsettling piece.

"An anime heroine with secret magical powers! Next thing you know, My-HiME will feature giant robots..."

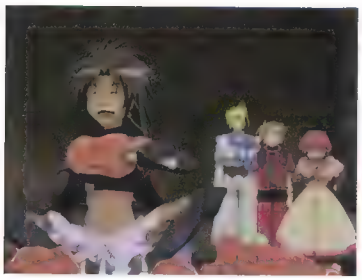


Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	125 minutes
Rating	13 and up	Available	June 13, 2006

Elemental Gelade

Hooked on a Feeling

words **Jim Dewey**



Sleeping girls in containers should be left well-enough alone—you disturb their slumber and chances are you're about to get yourself swept up in a lot more than you bargained for. Cou, young sky pirate upstart that he is, does just that after his companions' latest raid, and discovers that Ren (that's the sleeping beauty) is an Edel Raid— not quite alien, but not quite human either, that can morph into a weapon of great power. Worse, because she's believed to be the last of a mythical clan, that makes everyone want her—protection agencies, ruffians, and even ninjas! Cou's trying to do everything he can to protect this kindred orphan, but between giant badger attacks and being green around the gills to boot, he's got a lot to learn.

"Based on the manga by Azuma Mayumi, the animated version gets a bit of spit and polish..."

Based on the manga by Azuma Mayumi, the animated version gets a bit of spit and polish, making the series a little more upbeat than its source material. While at its most basic level, it's a familiar concept—naïve kid discovers great power, becomes embroiled in heavy conflict, etc., it does provide better than usual fare—very quickly it's established that Cou doesn't want to rely on merging with Ren—he wants to take a crack at it on his own, and learn a few things in the process. Usually it's one special power use after another, and it's a welcome departure on the genre. While some episodes do feel a bit stretched, the variety of main characters (especially with the Arc Aile trio) provide comic relief that keeps the show from getting too heavy. By no means is this an extraordinary series, but it's good fare if you're itching for some adventure in the vein of *Scrapped Princess* or *Slayers*. **play**

Elemental Gelade — score 7.5

Area 88: Original OVA Series

Short Order Rice

1.5 million dollars, or three years of your life. That's what it takes to get out of Area 88. Shin Kazama, betrayed by his lifelong friend, signed up in a drunken stupor for a civil war in the Middle East, and now his once-bright future has to take him through killing an enemy that has no face, that he has no issue with. With a little help from war photographer (and fellow Japanese) Rocky Mutsuki, he might just see his beloved Ryoko again-- if he can stay alive long enough.

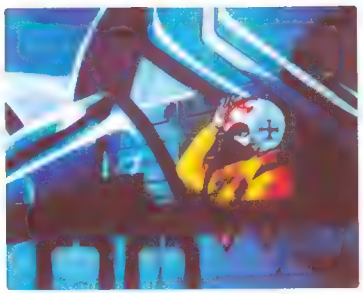
Watching the original, significantly older material that was later turned into a sharp, special effects-laden series usually proves to be painful when you're used to higher production values-- but not here. When you watch this 1985 production, it's amazing to think about how much of a pain it was to hand-draw such extreme movement, like an Immelman Turn or a jet slowly breaking apart after being rifled with gunfire-- but they did it with flying colors. Shin's plight resembles that of Dumas's protagonist in *The Count of Monte Cristo*-- only it's all purgatory, and little room for revenge. The story is obviously a condensed version of its offspring, but proves just as fascinating in its character development. If there's fault to be found, it's in the new dub which loses heartily to the original sub, sounding echoed in its recording and becomes incompatible with the background noise. Classic, well-written, and old-school snazzy, this OVA is a welcome addition to any action fan's collection, retro or new. **Jim Dewey**

"Classic, well-written, and old-school snazzy."

score 9.5

\+ Shin is much more easily rattled, and not as battle-hardened as his later incarnation, brightening the character's persona.

\- New dub is poor in quality; small weak spots in animation; Shin needs a barber.



Nanaka 6/17 volume 1

Innocence Revisited

When you're a kid, the world is your oyster. You're easily amused, you're willing to try new challenges, and cartoons are your life. But, you get older, things get complicated, and the next thing you know, you're an adult. Somber, uppity Nanaka however, thanks to a tumble down a flight of stairs, regresses back to six-years-old in her mind (believing it was a magical transformation from kid to grown-up), and it's up to lifelong friend and tough guy Menji to keep her out of the dangers of being a child in an adult world until she can get her memory back. Ah, to be young again.

If there's one thing to be said about Nanaka, it's that she's nothing if not optimistic. Her innocence really makes all the other kids in her high school seem boring and self-centered, and with her regression you feel almost like you'd want to be that young again too. Her stories are simplistic--learning to play the piano, standing up to bullies; that could easily wear on someone looking for something deeper in a story. But what it does have is a healthy dose of slapstick comedy, and a can-do Pollyanna spirit that infects you as you watch more and more. Merciful heavens, what will you do if you actually start thinking positive because of Nanaka? Maybe start living life as life, and not merely as a chore? Okay, that's a bit much, but regardless, *Nanaka 6/17*, even as light, fluffy fare proves to be a fun distraction for a serious world. **Jim Dewey**

"...The next thing you know, you're an adult"

Life's too short for such bickering.

score 7.5

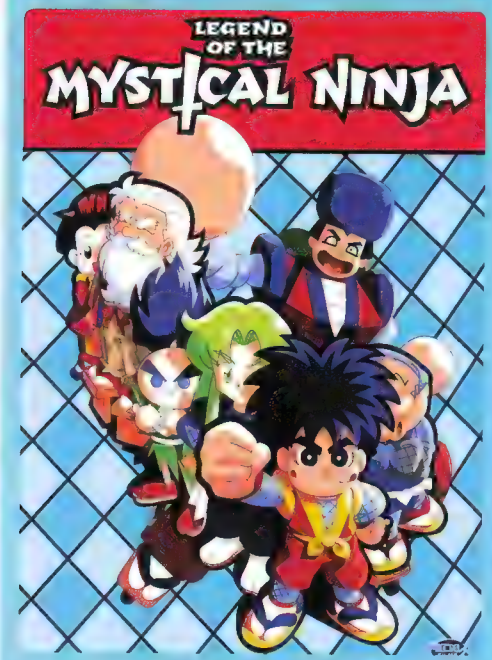
\+ Both dub and sub voices for Nanaka are bubbly; bullies getting beaten up by their sisters is always good for a laugh.

\- Endings are always predictably obvious, and Nanaka can be a bit too innocent for her own good.

anime essentials

must-have anime, manga & music

watch this



Legend of the Mystical Ninja Complete Collection Thin Pack

read this

MS Gundam SEED Destiny

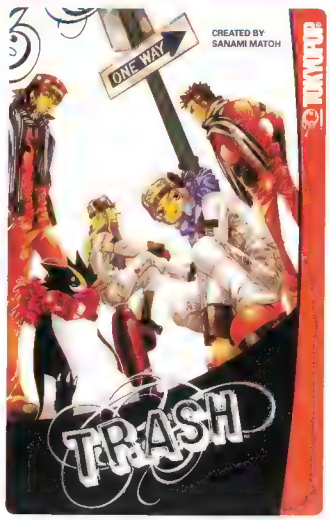
Publisher: Del Rey **Volume:** 1
Rating: 13+ **Genre:** Adventure

Gundam will never die, at least not as long as the stories continue to put such a personal face on the tragedy of war. Set in Year 71 of the Cosmic Era, Destiny quickly segues from the prospect of peace to yet another catastrophic confrontation between the Earth Alliance and Zaft Empire.

Elemental Gelade

Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1
Rating: 13+ **Genre:** Action

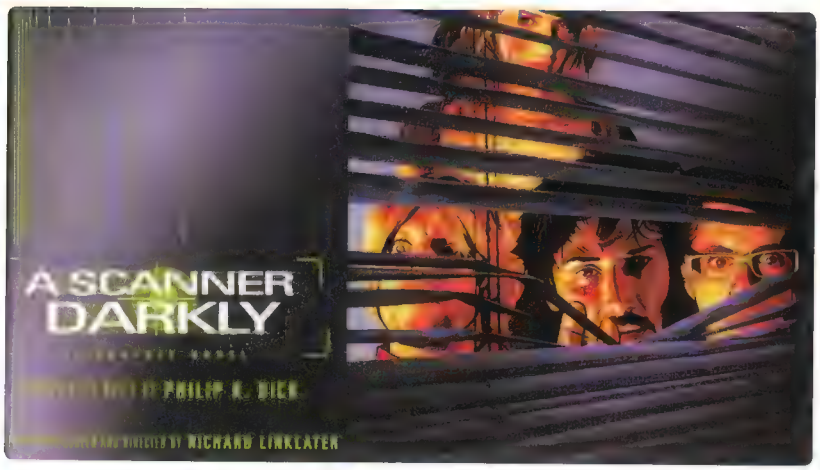
With the anime just out, the time is right to get the full vision via the TokyoPop manga about sky pirate and unlikely hero Coud Van Giruet and the living (and quite beautiful) weapon that transforms him into the ultimate fighting machine.



Trash

Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1
Rating: 16+ **Genre:** Comedy/Drama

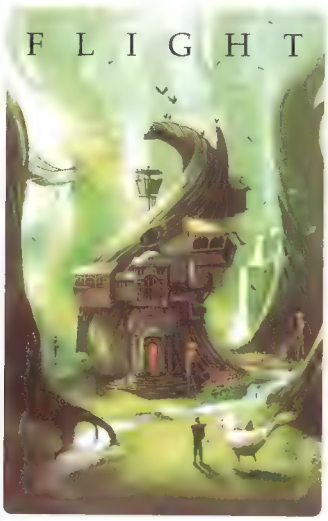
A dramedy about a garbage service "filled with cute guys!!" that's really a front for thievery? Shoujo this isn't (we get guns and gangsters too), but funny, incredibly well drawn and impossible to put down it is.



A Scanner Darkly: A Graphic Novel

Publisher: Pantheon Books **Volume:** NA **Rating:** NA

It's not anime-based, no, (so we blur the lines a little) but, it is a brilliant still-work based on A Scanner Darkly; Phillip K. Dick's novel and soon to be released feature film about drug dealer Bob Arctor's inner rivalry with the drug "Substance D".



Flight

Publisher: Ballantine Books **Volume:** 3
Rating: NA **Genre:** Assorted

A collection of short stories; anyone who opens Flight will be instantly transfixed by its contents. Quite possibly the single most intriguing collection of art and story ever assembled, it is an absolute requisite experience.

Kuro Gane

Publisher: Del Rey **Volume:** 1
Rating: 13+ **Genre:** Action/Sci-Fi

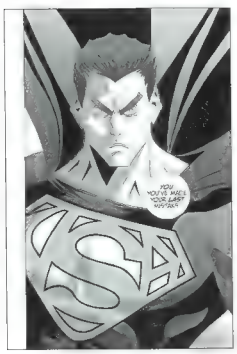
Yet another spectacular series is born. Do not miss Kuro Gane, about a young samurai, Jintetsu, whose vengeance leads to his gruesome death which leads to his new, very complicated life. This book has a fantastic look and story.

MBQ

Not to be confused with BBQ

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Action/Comedy	Volume	2
Story	Felipe Smith	Art	Felipe Smith	Rating	16+

score A



Felipe Smith has truly outdone himself with MBQ Volume 2. Pulp Fiction looks like Pup Fiction stacked up against the chain of events chaos, comedy, and mass destruction on tap here. Between the explosive, sadistic über-violent activities of Heavyweight champ Big "Bro" Brody whose unbridled rage bursts off the page, to the after hours mirth at McBurger Queen with rotund "Jeff", and a pair of seriously dysfunctional cops, we find Dee, the quintessential thug, and his boy Omario, a bizarre struggling seemingly dim-witted comic-book artist with a penchant for showing up in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm now his number one fan. When Felipe takes us from the fiery pages of MBQ into Omario's "pages" words cannot possibly describe what happens, but no game or anime fan dare not—as Omario would say—"recognize!!!" **DH**

Read it if... You wanna go a little...no, a lot crazy

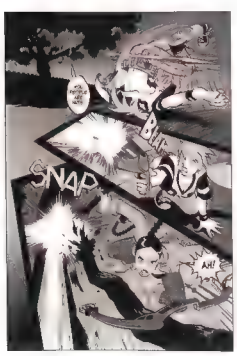
"Pulp Fiction looks like Pup Fiction stacked up against the chain of events chaos, comedy, and mass destruction..."

Riding Shotgun

Anytime, anywhere

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Comedy/Action	Volume	1
Story	Nate Bowden	Art	Tracy Yardley	Rating	16+

score B+

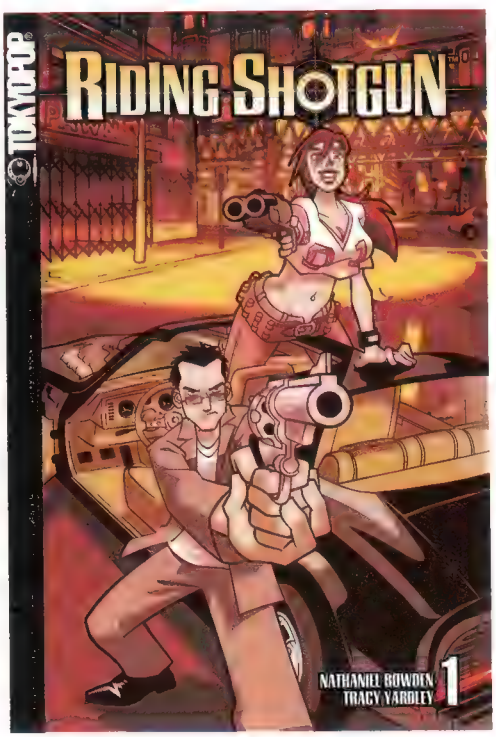


Thanks to Sonny Brunson, CEO of Brunson Armaments, assassination has become an industry like any other. Anyone with a license to kill can legally take and carry out hits, and it's a long road to the top of the heap.

Small time, but resourceful assassin Doyle Harrington wants to move up in the world and out of the killing business, so he takes an interview with the N.A.C (National Assassination Commission) to get at some higher stakes contracts. But things turn ugly quick and before you know it the contract (and a fat one at that) is on him. Fighting at his side is Abbigail Witt, a hot young thing who left home to pursue a career in killing, and she loves her work. Now they're both on the run, along with an uninvited guest with a dangerous secret. Riding Shotgun is a wild ride--like one big chain reaction going off in your head. ...And things are just getting started. **DH**

Read it if... You find the state of buddy cop movies seriously ill

"...a hot young thing who left home to pursue a career in killing, and she loves her work."



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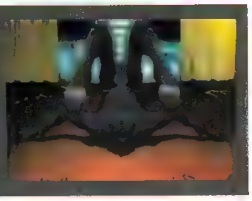
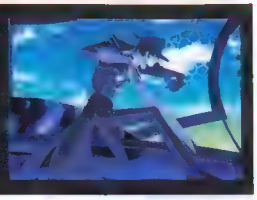


Gun Sword
geneon entertainment

Alive or dead you're coming with them...



Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Karas** manga entertainment
02	**Naruto** viz media
03	**Fullmetal Alchemist Movie** funimation entertainment
04	**Gun Sword** geneon entertainment
05	**Samurai 7** funimation entertainment
06	**Godannar** adv films
07	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
08	**Speed Grapher** funimation entertainment
09	**Kamichu!** geneon entertainment
10	**Howl's Moving Castle** buena vista home entertainment

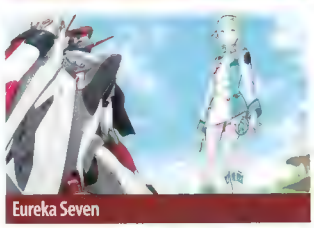
Trinity Blood

Naruto

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Fullmetal Alchemist Movie** funimation entertainment
02	**Karas** manga entertainment
03	**Eureka Seven** bandai entertainment
04	**Moon Phase** funimation entertainment
05	**Gun Sword** geneon entertainment
06	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
07	**Godannar** adv films
08	**Kamichu!** geneon entertainment
09	**Speed Grapher** funimation entertainment
10	**This Ugly Yet Beautiful World** adv films

Full Metal Alchemist Movie


Eureka Seven

Play Editor and Reader Picks

Dave Halverson

01	**Karas** manga entertainment
02	**Shana** geneon entertainment
03	**Moon Phase** funimation entertainment
04	**Gun Sword** geneon entertainment
05	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment

Jim Dewey

01	**Area 88 OVA** adv films
02	**Kamichu!** geneon entertainment
03	**Animation Runner Kuromi** central park media
04	**Gankutsuou** geneon entertainment
05	**Strawberry Marshmallow** geneon entertainment

Eric Patterson

01	**Kamichu!** geneon entertainment
02	**Diamond Daydreams** adv films
03	**Kodocha** funimation entertainment
04	**Naruto** viz media
05	**Gunbuster** manga entertainment

Heather Campbell

01	**Evangelion 10th Anniversary** adv films
02	**Loveless** media blasters
03	**Naruto** viz media
04	**Ergo Proxy** geneon entertainment
05	**Genshiken** media blasters

Nelson Lui

01	**Kamichu!** geneon entertainment
02	**Ninja Nonsense** funimation entertainment
03	**Moon Phase** funimation entertainment
04	**Shana** geneon entertainment
05	**Strawberry Marshmallow** geneon entertainment

Readers' Most Wanted

01	**Fullmetal Alchemist Movie** funimation ent.
02	**Yu Yu Hakusho** manga entertainment
03	**Castle of Cagliostro SE** manga entertainment
04	**Ergo Proxy** geneon entertainment
05	**This Ugly Yet Beautiful World** adv films

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**Basilisk** del rey
02	**Naruto** viz media
03	**Bleach** viz media
04	**Gundam SEED Destiny** del rey
05	**Last Fantasy** tokyopop

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Korgoth of Barbaria

Will the real Must See TV please stand up

As anyone who's seen it can attest, Korgoth of Barbaria is to cartoons what Howard Stern is to talk radio. The format's the same, but the material is 100% no-holds-barred. It's what we as Americans deserve in a cartoon: dismemberment, public urination, seething evil, and lots of boobage... tongue embedded so far into cheek that it pops through the eye socket. That's in here too. Here's what creator Aarron Springer had to say for himself.

By Kevin Halverson

play: First, a wholehearted thank you: Everyone I've shared Korgoth with will be getting a season pass... Is this even legal?
Aarron Springer: What, this interview?

After the first televised Barbarian piss ever, we're treated to Korgoth ripping off a guy's arm, beating him with it, heaving it at oncoming attackers, a double-impaling (polished off with a cleaver to the crotch) and then the dismembered appendage coming to rest as a finger pokes a selection on the jukebox that begins pounding out heavy metal, signaling the real fight. Torsos are split, peeled and ignited all before scene one comes to a close. This is better than pay-per-view! What do you have to say for yourself? Nice choreography by the way!
Thanks- the fight scene in the Swine's Face Tavern worked out well. It was expensive to make, because we hired a male model to come in and pose for the actions, and after our third attempt to impale him with a yardstick, he decided to charge extra.

How difficult was it to pitch/get Korgoth made? As long overdue as it is, it's edgy even for Swim. It's also their best original show ever.
Mike Lazzo told me once he would rather invest in people than individual projects. (Or something like that.) He knew who would be involved here and what we've done in the past, and decided to start Korgoth rolling based on little more than a basic idea and a few improvised drawings. He is a man of adventure.

What inspired Korgoth? Is it accurate to say it's akin to something out of Heavy Metal (magazine) only with a cheeky sitcom core, fusing medieval carnage and T&A with pop culture? How do you describe this?
I would describe it using a long, low moan that ascends into a whine, then tapers off again.

There's a serious sense of humor at work here: The screaming dead bodies when Scrotus gets peeled; slathering in pools of giant pigeon dung, hideous beasts formed of chewing gum...but as funny as it is by the hairy balls of the gods, the humor's got nothing on the carnage (the tonguing Korgoth suffers is the closest a cartoon has ever gotten me to actually hurling). I've never seen a cartoon spew as much blood and goo. That would've been awesome if you barfed.

So the wizard has affixed his head to Korgoth's wench and flown off (did you have to kill her off by the way? Will there be more like her?) and Gog-ma-Gogg has cursed him with a hideous parasite. Will these characters re-appear in a continuous story arch or will you create each episode as its own solitary adventure? Is there a core villain or faction?
I think there will definitely be some continuity to the show. For example, Korgoth's loincloth will become more soiled over time, and eventually someday he may have to pay to get it dry cleaned. As for Orala returning, time will only tell. I would expect to see more Gog-ma-Gogg in the future. The chances of this will increase when the show goes to series.

"I realized he secretly understood the flavor of the show and was ready to give it everything he had. He then proceeded to wield his pencil as if it were a mighty blade!"

You do realize how great a game this would make? Have you pitched it to any publishers yet?
Not yet, but here goes: I would like to see this world realized as a PvP physics-based MMO (think Half-Life 2 meets GTA meets Black Tiger) where players can construct equipment or structures out of other items based on their inherent physical properties. So, you could make a helmet by bending chicken-wire around your head, or a musical instrument by dropping cockroaches down a section of pipe. This instrument (we'll call it a "Roach Stick" here) could soothe, enrage, or bore its listener based on his or her hearing skill and/ or mental prowess. Other examples might be: a chariot out of a wheelbarrow and a captive ghoul, or a fortress out of

"So, you could make a helmet by bending chicken-wire around your head, or a musical instrument by dropping cockroaches down a section of pipe."

an overturned cart. The possibilities are endless! Also, the idea of grinding mobs is now optional: characters advance in skill just by existing in the game world... so you could level up just by sitting at the bar, or taking a nap. Publishers, feel free to contact me directly!

The music is just fierce. What's Lee Holdridge's background? Did he produce or does he actually play the music? How did he get involved with the project?
Lee Holdridge is the man who composed the soundtrack to "The Beastmaster," which is a very mighty movie. He is a deft musician with a diverse musical background who I suspect also has martial arts skills. We contacted his agency, who sent us work from various composers. I sensed a certain arcane quality to Lee's work, so I called him, and we talked about gongs.
This project was a challenge for Lee because I wanted a diverse range of musical styles to suit the adventure, ranging from medieval to very medieval. But Lee thrives on challenge, and brought with him a magical team of guys to help make the music. Lee composed the soundtrack, Robert Irving was responsible for some additional composition, synth performance and overall midi programming, engineer Tim Byron came in at night and laid down those searing guitar solos, and heroic Gregg Bissonette swooped down and played drums.

I can't imagine the looks on their faces at Seoul Korea's Rough Draft Studios when they saw this one. Did the Korean animators have any qualms about the material? Was KimJong alerted? How well did they represent your vision with the animation? Did you select this studio?
I think the Korean animators liked this project. They certainly put a lot into it. I had a chance to meet with Director Jym right before he started animating Korgoth. He just kept staring at the character designs and shaking his head. But after talking, I realized he secretly understood the flavor of the show and was ready to give it everything he had. He then proceeded to wield his pencil as if it were a mighty blade!

The animation is actually quite good and at moments downright inspired. Did you emphasize where you wanted the most attention to detail?
Genndy Tartakovsky was the animation director on the pilot, and also helped in many other areas of production. We have worked closely together before, and we had a good time making Korgoth. Genndy is great at making it "juicy," as he calls it, which in timing involves adding acting poses or subtle holds so the viewer really feels the action or humor depicted in the storyboard. This, combined with incredible work by Robert Alvarez and Rough Draft, made the animation what it is. I remember how exciting it was to get the first pencil test tape and see the close-up of Korgoth's eyeballs aiming down at those giant pigeons.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. We wish you much success and look forward to our next Korgoth sighting.
Huzzah!! **play**

Medieval Drive-Thru.

Ren & Stimpy: The Lost Episodes

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Not lost as in never ran, but lost as in newly created. These gems, spun from ardent fan mail, spilled out of John K's itchy brain in the early '90s but it wasn't until Spike TV called and told him he could let the naked poop covered genie out of the bottle that he rounded up the team (some old and some new) to bring them to animated life. The six all-new cartoons are not only a testament to what cartoons should be, could be, and will never be again, (although Rob Zombie's next movie is animation) but, the educational and social implications make them requisite viewing. For instance, if you're going to cling to massive naked boobage on the beach, always check with the lifeguard first. And in the case you discover your love child is really a large piece of poop, treat it as one of your own. Also beware of fire chiefs voiced by cartoon legend Ralph Bakshi, and their sticky, log-filled toilets, or bring a rain coat. Nearly as great as the six new 'toons (nearly I say, there's no topping them) the Lost Episodes gives us first-hand insight into the corporate greed and ignorance that lead to the glut of crap cartoons we were stuck watching in the '80s and how John K. helped revolutionize Flash animation on the web. More than a mere two-disc CD, this is like a filthy treasure that sticks with you (and to you) wherever you go. Only an "*eeediot!*" would miss it. **Dave Halverson**

Night Watch

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

A second viewing of the Russian sci-fi horror film *Night Watch* upped my appreciation for its weird style and slick creepiness. The plot remains no less convoluted: based on a successful novel and planned as a trilogy, the events play out with more pop leanings than literate depths. Vampires rule their own little section of this morally decaying world, warring for... centuries old victory and dominance? The affecting particulars are never quite understood. It is a tale of light versus darkness, of consequence and tortured love. The movie is random and chaotic, never caring much if its characters make complete sense. There is a surreal, occasionally unsettling tone to *Night Watch*, yet it doesn't stick to the genre convention you might come to expect. **Brady Fiechter**

Scary Movie 4

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

How obtuse of me to decide *Scary Movie 4* was going to suck ass before I actually, well, you know, watched it. Guess that's because I was convinced *Scary Movie 3* kissed whatever edgy humor was left in the series bye-bye, leaving tired jokes and brain-dead retreads to bury the dead weight for good. This time out, director David Zucker, known for his co-directing work on the classic comedy Airplane and Naked Gun, lightens things up a bit, and the results are refreshed strides for a series that will likely keep going. But do we need more *Scary Movie*?

This latest in absurd movie parodies drops a few big laughs, treading through all sorts of crass, uncouth waters, extending jokes out to their breaking points. Even Leslie Nielson shows up to join the ladies in flashing random scenes of exposed flesh. The big downer here is that you can only take so much *Scary Movie* before it's time to hang up the rehashed themes. I'm glad I did finally give the movie the chance it deserves, but like watching the real life Tom Cruise go through his manic Oprah appearance—one of the best gags here in the movie—you can only watch so long before humorous becomes annoying.
Brady Fiechter

08_06 CASEY LOE
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

The one thing the world agrees on...

If you felt a strange tingling in your extremities back in June, you were feeling the ripple effects of an unprecedented international game-industry convergence. For a few days in the middle of the month, the three top-selling games in America matched the three top-selling games in Japan. This has never, ever happened before in recorded history. Probably. I didn't actually research it or anything, but come on, what are the odds?

Okay, I'll admit that I am fudging the numbers a bit. The top three were New Super Mario Bros. and Brain Age, with the third slot being Big Brain Academy here and Brain Age 2 in Japan. Close enough, right? Poor Europe didn't have Mario yet, but Brain Age was in the top five, and almost certainly joined Mario in the top three when it (along with the DS Lite) launched later in the month. Other similarities abounded: Animal Crossing has stubbornly refused to leave the top ten of either Europe or Japan, clinging on for 12 and 25 weeks, respectively. Likewise, Mario Kart remains a perennial international favorite, and popped up in the top 10's of both the US and Japan.

What's weird is that in the last few years, the conventional wisdom has been that the world's game markets are drifting further apart. America didn't share a single top-ten title with Japan last year and only had Pokémon in common in 2004 (Gran Turismo 4 did make the top ten in both countries, but in different years). Never has the dichotomy been more pronounced than when Americans lined up to get screwed on $800 Xbox 360 bundles while Japanese consumers allowed mountains of unsold Xbox 360's to quietly biodegrade. But gamers of all nationalities have finally found something to agree on: The DS is awesome and our brains desperately need training. Who knew?

Of course, Japan remains at the forefront of fanatical DS worship. Of the country's ten top-selling titles in 2005, seven were DS games. And the only non-DS game to crack the top five was Final Fantasy XII, which still got crushed by Animal Crossing DS. Now that the DS Lite is out and selling briskly in the US, I wouldn't be surprised to see similar results here in 2006. That's sort of cool, but it's also somewhat terrifying. Of those seven top-ten DS titles, only one—Mario Kart—was an actual game with any sort of objective. The other six consisted of Animal Crossing, three (!) Brain games, Nintendogs and the DS version of Tamagotchi. Doesn't anyone in Japan want to kill monsters anymore? Fortunately, the blistering success of New Super Mario Bros. (1.6 million copies in 4 weeks) suggests that Japan's DS revolution may still have room for an occasional, you know, *game*.

Perhaps the sudden dominance of weird DS non-games is simply a result of the bizarre situation the industry has found itself in. While consumers seem to be taking a wait-and-see attitude about the next generation of consoles, they're already losing interest in the current generation, with Xbox and GameCube development effectively dead and no one wanting to be caught releasing a PS2 game after November. Interest in the PS3 seems high in Japan, but the buzz is bad here, while the situation is basically reversed for the Xbox 360. What are companies with proven, internationally popular franchises to do? Porting games across platforms is reportedly difficult, and while the Wii is looking good, no one wants to release a franchise sequel with Wii-level graphics or a control scheme that discourages intense play.

As a result, the only safe bets seem to be the DS and, to a lesser extent, the PSP. Third parties are already taking major franchise titles like Final Fantasy III, Tales of the Tempest and Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker to the DS, and those games all began development back when the system was nothing more than a moderate hit. God only knows what high-budget, high-profile games are being developed now that the DS is perceived as the only internationally viable platform.

It seems we've reached the end of the era of portable systems being a dumping ground for 10-year old ports, lame spin-offs and cookie-cutter licensed adventure games. DS and PSP games pop up in most-wanted lists at ten times the rate that GameBoy Advance games ever did, and these high-profile titles will spur more hardware sales, which will only lead to more high-profile titles. Ultimately, this endless loop may even lead to a resurgence of proper games where you kill stuff or smash things instead of making friends, raising digital pets, or—worst of all—learning things. But don't worry, Brain Age fans: I'm sure the DS's future will continue to hold scores of games with titles like "Upsmarten Your Brain Now!" and "Brain Engooderment: Genius Edition." Enjoy.

"If you felt a strange tingling in your extremities back in June, you were feeling the ripple effects of an unprecedented international game-industry convergence."

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